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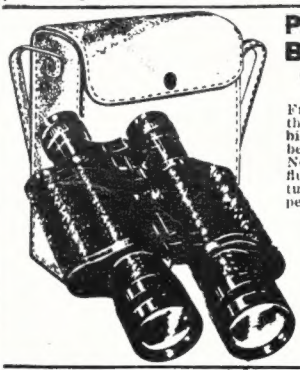

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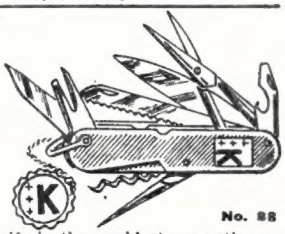

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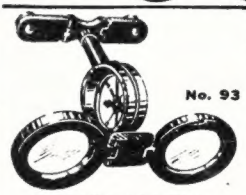

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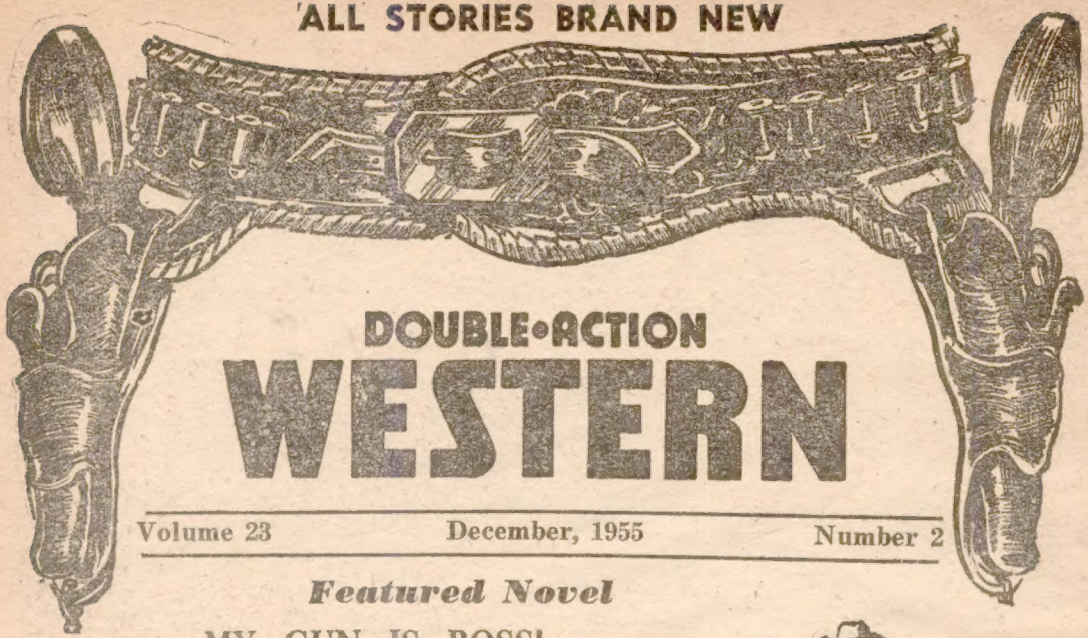

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 23 December, 1955 Number 2

Featured Novel

MY GUN IS BOSS!

by E. E. Clement 62

Ned Griff rode into Rich Bar with larceny in mind, and found he'd have to wipe out the crooks who were presently running and exploiting the town. So . . . he'd be a hero . . . for a while . . .

Smashing Novelets

THE DEVIL'S DRIFT FENCE ..... Lee Floren 6

Why was Jim Hawkins apparently ready to murder one of his own men and frame the killing onto Ed Jones — over a drift-fence which should be as much to Hawkins' benefit as Jones's?

HEADS UP! ..... W. C. Tuttle 24

"Heads you win, sheriff; you live and I shoot your son, instead. Tails, you lose, and you get plugged." But Sheriff Steele had been more than ready to hang his son . . .

Short Stories and Features

A DATE WITH DESTINY (*Davy Crockett's Own Story*) ... Harold Gluck 43

Here is authentic material, from the prime source — Davy himself!

NOT FOR WAGES ..... Ezra C. Planck 47

Larsen should have gotten a bill of sale for those horses!

THE REAL WEST 58

Albert Abarbanel tells about "The Tonkawas".

KNOW YORE WEST (*Quiz Feature*) ..... James A. Hines 61

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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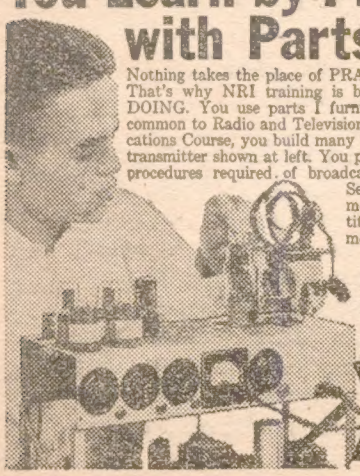

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Fences would protect Big Jim Hawkins' stock as well as Ed Jones' herd — yet, Hawkins was ready to kill to prevent Jones from fencing. So there had to be some other reason, and Ed had to find it if he wasn't going to be railroaded into prison for life.

THE DEVIL'S DRIFT FENCE

Novelet of Rangeland Mystery

by LEE FLOREN

TALL ED JONES, a cowboy on foot, struggled to untangle the barbwire from the roll; he did not see the riders come over the distant hill until Mary said excitedly, "Here comes some riders, Ed! From the direction of Moose City, too!"

Ed straightened—bony, twenty-three years old; his blue eyes narrowed as he studied the approaching horsemen. Danger played in him, making him cold and tough. "Big Jim Hawkins rides the lead, Mary; three of his gunslammers are with him, looks like. Marshal Newton is the fifth, ain't he?"

"Looks like the marshal, Ed."

Ed glanced at her. Small, dark, she was the woman he wanted. Just now, though, her voice had held worry.

"Shall I go into the cabin for a rifle, Ed?"

Ed smiled. "Take it easy, honey."

They watched the riders approach. Big Jim Hawkins rode a black stud—a flashy-looking horse that always fought his bit; his gunmen flanked him. Behind them, trailing along, came the marshal.

They drew rein.

Big Jim let his deep-set eyes travel along the new fence. They ran across the three strands of barbwire and the new pine posts. His gunmen were silent, satellites watching their boss. Marshal Newton chewed his tobacco diligently and avoided Ed Jones' eyes.

"Almost got the fence finished, eh, Jones?" It was Big Jim Hawkins who spoke. He owned a deep, heavy voice that seemed to come from a rain barrel; his chest, also, was deep as a rain barrel. He looked at Ed with heavy insolent eyes.

Ed said, "One more wire."

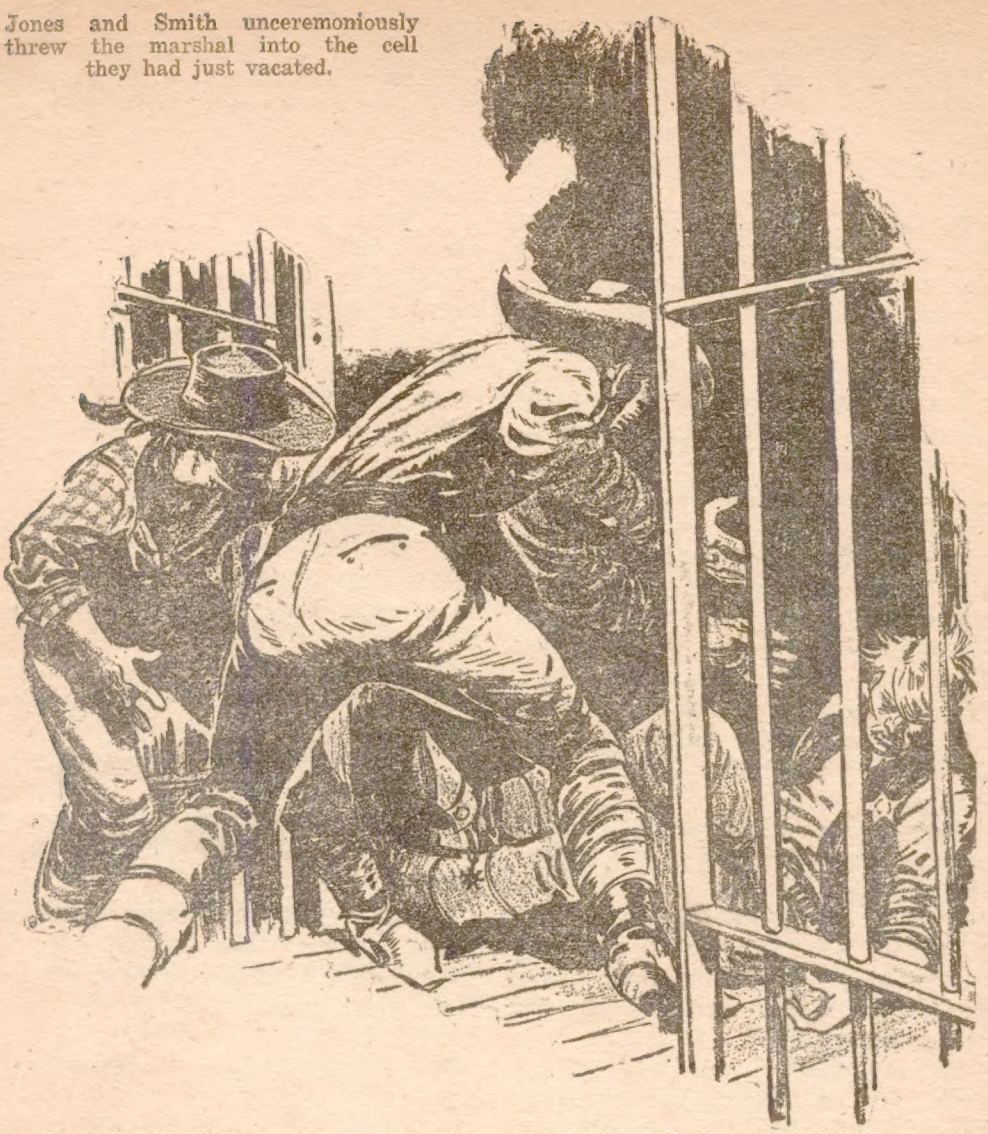
"Four strands, eh?"

"Four," Ed said.

Big Jim shifted in his hand-carved saddle, stirrup-leathers creaking. Marshal Newton seemed to have a grudge against his tobacco, for he chewed even harder. Ed Jones found himself wondering if the local gossip were true: Did this lawman draw checks from Big Jim Hawkins, in addition to that paid him by the township?

Big Jim Hawkins looked hard at

Jones and Smith unceremoniously threw the marshal into the cell they had just vacated.



Mary Maloney. "What you doin' here with this nester, Mary?"

"What's it to you?" the girl stormed; "you're not my guardian!"

Big Jim Hawkins allowed his thick lips to form an amused smile. But the smile was not amused—he just thought it was. The ugliness of it made Ed angry, but discretion overcame anger. These men were not out to his shirt-tail cow outfit to discuss the merits of a barbwire fence. They had another reason for riding range this cold, raw fall day.

"I'll git off'n this hoss, girl, an' lay you acrost my knee—"

Ed Jones cut in with, "You won't lay your dirty hands on her, Hawkins! Just stay in your saddle, turn your cayuse, and get out of here! You're on my land, remember?"

"Homesteaded land don't mean nothin' to me!" Big Jim glared at the cowpuncher-homesteader. "I'll get off this

hoss any time I want to; come on, boys, light an' rest your stirrups!"

ED GLANCED at Mary. Her face, for once, was pale. Yet under the paleness he saw a grim determination. He had played into the hands of Big Jim when he had practically invited him off his bronc. Now Big Jim and his three gunmen were on foot, almost surrounding him. Only the lawman remained in saddle.

"What do you devils want?" Ed demanded.

"I don't like the way you talk to me, Jones." Hawkins spoke with harsh anger rimming his words. "I've knowed Mary since she was a tyke two feet high. If her ol' father was alive, he'd be plumb ashamed to see his daughter runnin' aroun' with a danged hoeman!"

"You shut up!" Mary screamed the words.

Ed said, "Let me handle this, Mary," and his calm voice evidently reassured the girl for color had come into her pretty face. Ed looked at Big Jim Hawkins. "I asked you once what you men wanted here on my farm. I ask you again for the last time; why did you ride out here?"

"Marty White is dead."

Ed nodded, having his thoughts. Marty White had slung a gun for Hawkins; Big Jim owned the Quarter Circle S outfit, over on Flat Willow Creek. Ed had had an argument with Marty a few days ago in the *El Dorado Saloon*, down in Moose City. Marty had deliberately picked the fight. Ed knew, at that time, that White had had orders from Hawkins to pick a fight with the nester and to get him into a gunfight. Jones had not fallen for the bait; with his fists, he had beaten the two-bit gunslinger into a pulp.

Ed clearly remembered the scene. Marty White, lying on his side, blood coming from his mouth. White had sworn to kill him.

"When did he die?"

"The marshal found him dead this mornin'."

Marshal Newton nodded.

"What's the rest of the story?" Ed wanted to know.

Hawkins smiled crookedly. "He was found dead along your Hardscrabble Crick drift-fence. He had cut the fence with fence-pliers. He had a bullet through his heart."

"Good riddance.... Where do I tie in?"

"You killed him!"

"I did like—!" Ed felt fear touch him. "I haven't been on Hardscrabble for over a week now; you gotta think up a better story, you two-bit saloonman cow-dog!"

There was a silence.

"I got work to do," Ed said significantly.

Hawkins said, "You won't do it."

"Why not?"

Marshal Newton said, voice not too steady: "You're goin' into my jail, Jones!"

Ed glanced at the lawman. He was being framed; this thought roared through him. His boyish face, severe from stress, gave no hint of his inner conflict.

Mary said, "I'm going into the house, Ed."

Hawkins spoke to a gunman. "Go with her and watch her!"

"With pleasure, boss."

Ed knew that Mary wanted to get a rifle; he looked at Newton. "On what charge?"

"Murder of Marty White... We found a letter on the spot. Addressed to you." White took the letter from his pocket. "Came from your mother back in Ohio. Found it beside White's body, we did..."

"Let me look at it."

Marshal Newton shook his head. "You might tear it up. This is state's evidence. I cain't let you git your paws on it, Jones!"

"How do you like pulling down two sets of wages?" Ed jeered.

Anger flooded the lawman's face. "Don't git too free with your tongue. You had a fistfight with Marty; now we found him dead. Add two an' two together an' a man gits the sum of four."

ED SAID, "I lost that letter from my pocket during my fight with White; somebody has picked it up. That person has killed White and planted that letter there to make it look like I done him in. You or one of your gunhands find that letter, Hawkins?"

"You've said enough!" Big Jim Hawkins spat his words. "Git on your bronc an' come into town with us an' make it pronto. This wind is too cold for a man to be in! Make tracks toward your corral an' your bronc!"

"You the arresting officer?" Ed spoke scornfully.

"You'll find out; you won't build no drift fence acrost grass my cows has grazed on for years, believe you me!"

"You're framing me," Ed said angrily.

"Tell it to the judge."

"*Your* judge, Hawkins!" Ed measured the cowman with a belligerent stare. Anger was thick in him—a deep, blind anger. He knew he would have to control it. Hawkins had his gunmen with him for but one purpose—if he, Ed Jones, made a move toward a gun, the gunslingers would cut him down. That would suit Hawkins just right, and Marshal Newton would evidently claim the Hawkins gunmen had acted in self defense. Ed looked at the lawman and said, "*Your* tinbadge, too, Hawkins."

"What you say will go ag'in you!" Newton blurted.

Ed made his anger fall back. He knew they had him cornered. He decided, then, not to use guns—his fists would do, for the time being.

He glanced toward his cabin.

"She won't git you no rifle," Hawkins leered; "my man will see to that. That cowman's daughter sure has lost her head over a loco cowpuncher who has decided to turn farmer right in the middle of my grass—"

Big Jim Hawkins' words were suddenly cut short.

Ed Jones' rising right fist, smashing the cowman's jaw, was the reason. He hit with a left, missed. Again, he hit the big cowman-saloonkeeper. He saw Hawkins' face through an angry blur. The man went down, falling on his side; momentum of a blow took Ed Jones over the cowman's form.

A fist, coming out of nowhere, clipped Ed over the right ear. It turned him, made red devils dance across his brain. Dimly he realized one of the gunmen had hit him on the side of the head.

He had hit hard, too—too hard. Ed felt his knees weaken, he saw the ground start up toward him. Marshal Newton was hollering something; actually, the lawman's voice was loud and bellowing. But to Ed it sounded dim and far away.

He saw a man's jutting jaw. With all his failing strength, he threw a punch toward it. He felt shock run up his forearm. With gratitude, he realized he had, by sheer luck, connected. One of the gunmen was down!

Marshal Newton's voice was stronger now. That meant that the cobwebs were leaving his brain! He swung on the third man, missed. Again, he moved ahead; he stumbled. He had fallen over Big Jim Hawkins!

He caught himself, and the gunman, who was swinging his rifle, missed his blow—the rifle-stock slipping harmlessly over Ed's head. Ed realized he was putting up a good fight—two men down, one of them Hawkins! Still, he had been foolhardy to start this—

Something hit him over the head. As he went down, he glimpsed the rifle-

stock that had slugged him. The man who had followed Mary into the cabin had hit him, Ed Jones, with one of his own rifles!

Then Jones was out cold.

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ED JONES regained consciousness slowly. He was aware he was being bounced around and his first thought was that he was in a boat. That wasn't logical and, upon becoming more wide awake, he discovered he was in a buckboard. His hands and feet were tied and he bounced as the buckboard followed the bumpy trail toward Moose City.

"The nester's comin' to," a man said.

Ed tried to sit up; he couldn't. He glared at the man who sat on the seat and drove the team. The man grinned, spat at him, then turned his attention to his team.

Ed thought, *I'm in my own buckboard.*

His head felt as if a drunk Sioux was beating a wild tomtom in his skull. Maybe Sitting Bull had come down from Canada—General Miles had run him into Alberta Province— But it wasn't a Sioux. That rifle-stock had really knocked him cold!

Riders followed the buckboard. Big Jim Hawkins rode close and looked down with, "Hope this finds your skull really achin', Jones."

Ed said nothing. His head did not achieve its usual clearness until some time had passed. He lay in the buckboard, a trussed man being hauled to jail, and he gave his predicament some deep thought despite his pounding brain.

He thought of Mary Maloney. She did not ride with Hawkins and his gunmen and the lawman. About a year ago, Mary's father had died, leaving her the big Cinchring outfit, over on Frenchman Creek. Ed had punched cows for Mack Maloney. He had quit to start a little spread of his own. Hawkins had called him a nester. He was not, in the strictest sense of the word, a farmer—true, he had taken-up a homestead, but he aimed to run cattle, not follow a plow. And he had run out drift-fences across his property to keep his few head of stock from drifting too far. The drift-fences, he knew, were what really caused the trouble.

Hawkins had sworn nobody would run barbwire across his range. He had no deeds to the grass, but that made no difference, he claimed—he claimed squatter's rights, ownership because of first settlement.

Ed claimed he had as much right to the grass as had Big Jim Hawkins' Quarter Circle S cows. He could not understand why Hawkins really opposed the drift-fences. They also kept Hawkins' cattle from drifting in a blizzard and he had a hundred cows to Ed Jones' one cow. Yet Big Jim was against the drift-fences. Was it because he, an old cowman, instinctively hated barbwire?

That hardly seemed logical.

"Ouch," Ed said, a new pain hitting his head.

"Holler in jail when we get there," Big Jim said. "An' in jail you'll be a long time, Jones. Nobody is murderin' one of my hands an' goin' scot-free. I'm makin' an example out of you."

"I ain't whipped yet, Hawkins."

Hawkins smiled crookedly. "So you think... Me, I think different, Jones."

Ed decided conversation was useless. When they reached the jail in Moose City the town's citizens flocked over to see him taken from the buckboard and put into the jail, which had only one cell and which was back of Marshal Newton's clapboard office at the far end of the street.

Ed said, "I demand a lawyer."

There were two lawyers in Moose City. One, a fat man named Markle, was Hawkins' lawyer; the other was a younger man named Phil Snow. Ed asked that Snow come and see him. Hawkins said to one of his gunmen, "Okay, you tell Snow this button wants to see him, savvy."

"Sure, boss, sure."

Ed, in the cell, did not see the wink the gunmen sent his boss. He lay on the bunk, sick and sore, and had his thoughts. Snow never came and the night pressed down. The town, except for an occasional barking dog, became quiet. Ed tested the bars and found them strong. He had to get out, he realized; he could not fight from inside a cell. He wanted a bronc under his legs, a rifle in the saddle-scabbard, a sixshooter on his hip. To get these he had to make a jailbreak. But how?

ED FINALLY slept. Morning came. He asked to have the doctor look at the cut on his head. Newton said, "You don't need a doctor;" nevertheless, he sent for the medico, who dressed the wound. Ed's headache had gone but he still felt a little weak in the knees.

"Where is Phil Snow?" Ed asked.

"Snow won't take your case."

"Where is Mary Maloney?"

"I saw her on the street a while ago."

Ed wondered why Mary had not come and visited him. He ate breakfast and then stretched out on the bunk, fighting his thoughts. Heels sounded in the corridor and Mary stood at the door, looking at him. With her was Marshal Newton, who glowered and chewed tobacco.

Ed got to his feet, heart beating rapidly. The girl was lovely standing there, dark and warm and comforting. He put his hands over hers on the bar and, for some reason, she moved back a pace, taking her hands from under his. Ed studied her and asked, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, Ed." Her voice, he decided, was forced.

"I sent word out for Phil Snow to come and see me; he never came. At least, he could have come to talk to me, anyway."

"He won't take your case. He told me that. He says the evidence against you is too great and all you can do is plead guilty."

"Plead guilty? I'm not guilty, and you know it. You were with me yesterday when I worked on that drift-fence—you can testify in my behalf. You know I didn't kill Marty White."

"I wasn't with you during the night," she said pointedly; "and White was murdered night before last, they figure."

Ed studied her. Her face was pale, her color unnatural, and her voice was too high. A little devil picked at his heart strings.

"Are you turnin' against me, Mary?" His voice was hoarse and seemed to come from a great distance.

"No."

"It sounds like you are."

Her head rose slightly. "I can only look at the evidence, Ed. I have to tell the truth, the whole truth—and nothing more. I'm sorry, Ed; and I'm sorry about Snow, too."

"We're all sorry." Ed couldn't hold back his cynicism.

She looked at him, turned, and went down the corridor, and Newton followed like a huge dog. Ed heard the lawman say, "You used good logic in dumpin' that two-bit sodbuster overboard, Mary. You're a cow-raiser and you'd best stick with the cowmen—with Big Jim Hawkins—"

"Close your mouth, Newton!"

Despite his hurt, Ed had to smile a little at the girl's brusque tone. But Newton, he decided, was right: Mary was a product of the cattle-country, and her sympathies should, by all

rights, be with the cowmen. He realized he had no strings tied to this dark-haired lovely girl. Once or twice, he had been on the verge of asking her to marry him, and then the thought had come: *What if she won't marry me?* And the possibilities of getting a *no* answer had tied a halfhitch around his tongue. She was the owner of a big cow-outfit, the daughter of a big cowman, and he was only a tumbleweed, a drifter—a man trying to get his boot in the door and starting a cow-spread of his own.

Who had killed Marty White? He hadn't killed the gunman; then, who had? Ed wrestled with this thought. Had some renegade Sioux buck killed the gunman? Two years before, the Sioux had wiped out Custer's command, down on the Little Big Horn River. General Miles had run Sitting Bull and his tribe into Canada. Rumor held it that the redskins were arming for a foray into the United States. From some source they were getting rifles and ammunition. Maybe White had run into a Sioux warrior and had died under his lead?

That wasn't logical. Had a Sioux killed Marty White, how would the letter have got on the scene of the killing? Ed did some mental arithmetic.

First, Big Jim Hawkins wanted him, Ed Jones, out of the way. And why? Because he was running drift fences across range claimed by Hawkins... Hawkins had used his fight with Marty White to a good advantage. Hawkins —or some of his gunmen—had killed White, planted the letter.

Ed shook his head slowly. There was one weakness in his scheme. White worked for Hawkins, and if Hawkins had killed him— Well, Hawkins sure wanted Ed Jones, out of the way, if he had gone to the extent of murdering a man—one of his hired hands—just to get the blame on Jones, and get him behind bars.

There was, Ed decided, more behind this than just a barbwire drift-fence. But what was it?

HE WAS MULLING this over when they led him before the local justice-of-peace for trial.

"How do you plead, Jones?"

"Not guilty."

The justice—a fat man—studied a piece of paper on the desk. The trial was being conducted in the *El Dorado Saloon*. "The evidence against you is an awful lot, Jones, and I advise you to plead guilty, an' throw yourself on the mercy of my court."

"Your court has no mercy; your court belongs to Big Jim Hawkins."

The justice banged with his make-shift gavel. "No more talk like that, Jones, or I sentence you without a trial. Bring on the first witness."

Hawkins lied; his men lied. Mary took the stand. She told the truth, her face pale, her eyes evading those of Ed Jones. Ed took the stand. He told the truth, but the truth was not enough —the evidence, he saw, was too much. The evidence of his fight with White, the letter found near White's body—the threats White had made against him. They added and had weight and the result was he was sentenced to life imprisonment at the territorial penitentiary. He would leave for the pen tomorrow accompanied by Marshal Newton.

"Any words, prisoner?"

"Nothing new to be added. I'm being railroaded by Hawkins; if I get a chance I'll kill him."

"That will be added to your record against you!"

"Add it and be danged, you cow-thief!"

Ed was handcuffed to Newton. As they left, he noticed a man who stood beside the door. For some reason, their eyes met; Ed saw a short man who would not weigh more than a hundred and twenty pounds if sopping wet.

Ed caught the smell of liquor on the man's breath. Probably another gunhand hired by Hawkins...

Then he was in his cell, the gate clanging shut.

Well, they had railroaded him... The rest of his life behind bars... He had to either break out of jail or make a break while being taken to the pen.

With difficulty he made his mind clear. The fact that Mary had also turned against him was a hard, hard blow. Well, a man never knew what a woman would do...

He paced the floor, bootheels jarring. How did a man break out of a jail? Time ran by and then he heard a scuffle out in the office. He could not see the door from this angle but he heard it open and he heard Newton pant, "Into a cell for you, stranger! You cain't come into my town an' git drunk an' insult everybody!"

"You can't handle me like this—I'm a citizen!"

"Yeah, a drunk citizen, too!"

A deputy was with Newton. The marshal had a man by the seat of his pants and the collar of his shirt. Ed recognized the small man he had seen standing by the door; he remembered the smell of whisky that had been on the man.

The deputy opened the door, eyes on Ed. The deputy had a .45 ready. Newton gave the short man a violent shove. He sailed through the door, hit the bunk, and then the door clanged again.

The deputy pouched his gun, watching Ed with a studied evilness.

Newton said, "Come on, deputy." He looked at Ed. "A partner for you, Jones."

Ed said nothing.

They stomped down the cell aisle, and Ed heard the outer door slam. He and the drunk were alone.

The drunk looked at nim. The lamplight from the aisle showed on his thin, angular face. "They're gone, Jones?"

Ed nodded.

The man said, "I'm Will Smith; I'm breaking you out of this tin jail, Jones."

Ed studied him. Drunkenness had apparently deserted this man. He seemed cold sober. "I don't follow you."

"I came to bust you outa jail. Is that enough?"

"That's enough," Ed said.

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THE SHARP blade split the leather at the top of the boot. There the stranger had a length of coiled piano-string wire.

Ed said, "You could tell me more, Smith."

"Later," Smith said.

Ed did not ask any more questions. There was something here he did not understand; but, for that matter, he did not understand very much about this trouble that had reared up and slammed hoofs into his face.

"What do we do first, Smith?"

Smith had made a loop out of the wire. He had about five or six feet of it when it was uncoiled. He laid the loop on the floor. Ed looked at it; because of the feeble light of the lamp he could hardly see the loop. Had he not known it was on the floor, he would not have seen it.

"Walk into that loop, Ed."

Ed stepped into the circle. The wire snapped up and both of his boots were suddenly pulled together. He almost fell down but he caught his balance in time.

"You've done that before," Ed said.

"Practice. In my profession, a man

has to be able to do a lot of things. Try it again a few times, Ed."

They tried the trick again; it worked. They repeated it about ten times. Finally Smith said, "That's enough. Now to get Newton or his deputy and get out of here."

Carefully he pushed the wire through the bars, making a loop just outside the door. Then, the wire in his hand, he sat on the bunk, apparently sick and drunk. He said, "How do I look, Ed? Real and natural, like a drunk?"

"You look that way."

"Call for the office. Tell them I'm dying—tell them anything to get them back here. And hope there is only one of them."

"What if two come? We can't snag two of them in that loop."

"We gotta hope only one comes, Ed. If two comes, we'll have to try to get them into the cell to look at me, and then jump them."

Ed nodded. He felt better now that he had a friend. He wondered if Mary had been instrumental in putting this gent into the cell with him. He still couldn't believe that Mary had deserted him.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Holler for the Law, Ed."

Ed rattled the cell door. This made a loud metallic sound. He called for Newton. Smith sat bent-over, head low. Because of the weak lamplight the wire loop was hard to see. Ed hollered, "Hey, Marshal, this gent is kickin' the bucket on me— Marshal, he's dyin'!"

The door opened. Ed heard Newton ask, "What the hades is goin' on back there, Jones? You tryin' to wake the dead?"

"This gent—he's dyin'—"

"Dyin'? Oh, close your mouth—"

"He took some pills," Ed hollered. "Dug 'em out of his pocket—he's groanin' on the bunk—"

"Pills!"

He heard Newton's boots start hurriedly toward the cell. Evidently the lawman was alone. Now he saw Newton coming into view. The lawman's ugly face was worried, and he almost ran. "What're you talkin' about, Jones?"

Ed said, "Look at him for yourself."

Smith sat hunched over, hands between his knees as he held the wire, head down; he did not look up. Newton stared at him, tongue moving out to wet his thick lips. His steer-big eyes were wide open as he studied Smith.

"You sick, fella?"

Newton had only one boot in the loop. Ed said, "Reach through the bars and shake him— I tried to get him to look up."

Newton moved both boots into the loop. Ed's throat was dry as he rasped, "Get him, Smith! Right now!"

SMITH CAME alive suddenly; he uncoiled like a wiry steel spring. The wire tightened, Newton's boots slid together, and Ed, reaching through the bars, had the lawman around the throat, pulling him against the bars. Newton tried to grunt something, but Ed's fingers, steelish on the lawman's throat, killed all but a few sounds; and Ed, for once, enjoyed choking a man.

Newton struggled, trying to kick; the wire held his legs secure. Ed choked him and Smith held the wire taut, lips compressed. Newton struggled, arms flailing; then, suddenly, this stopped. Ed let him slide to the floor. Ed had choked him into insensibility and he knelt, holding Newton close to the bars. Smith let slack come into the wire.

"You choked him down, Ed."

Ed said, "Hope I didn't kill the son, much as I would have liked to. I don't see no jail keys on him."

"The ring of keys isn't on him," Will Smith said huskily. "If he hasn't got a key in his pocket we might be

sunk, Ed. But when he threw me into this cell he had a key in his pocket, remember?"

"That's right," Ed said.

Will Smith said, "I'd best tighten this wire."

Ed went through Newton's pockets. He found a pocket-knife, a dirty bandanna, some nails—but no keys. Smith watched, pain on his face; Ed straightened. Ed said, "No keys. What'll we do?"

"Try his shirt pocket?"

"He wouldn't keep the key there—" Ed unbuttoned the flap "By golly, Smith, here it is—"

"Good."

The key unlocked the door and they were in the aisle. They unceremoniously threw the marshal into the cell. He slid along the floor and his head hit the far wall. Ed heard the sickening thud and smiled.

"Now to get our guns," Smith said.

"I sure owe you a lot," Ed said. "There can't be no deputy in the office, 'cause he would have heard the ruckus an' come to investigate."

"We'll have to chance that."

The office had a lamp burning on the old desk. The first thing Ed saw was his .45, hanging from the coat-rack. His Winchester .30-30 was leaning against the corner of the desk.

"You got a gun here, Smith?"

"On the desk there."

Ed saw a shoulder holster and a .38 Smith and Wesson on the desk. Smith shrugged his way into the holster as Ed Jones buckled on his .45. Then Ed had his rifle, and the breech clicked as he verified its load.

"Loaded. You got a rifle, Smith? We might need two rifles. Hawkins ain't gonna take this layin' down—he'll have riders from hell to Sunday out lookin' for me. I wonder where my hoss is?"

"In the alley, outside."

"You got everything arranged, eh? Me, I'm not quittin' the country—I'm gettin' Hawkins for what he did to me. I'm diggin' down an' findin' out what's behind all this."

"Your drift fence?"

"More'n that," Ed said. "I dunno what it is but it's somethin' bigger—or else I'm plumb mistaken. I asked if you had a rifle here." Ed had found three boxes of .30-30 cartridges in a drawer.

"Got one on my horse outside."

Ed said, "Let's go, Smith."

WITH ED JONES in the lead, they went out the back door and into a dark night. Later, Ed knew, there would be a moon. Doubt and puzzlement were with the young rancher. Who was this guy Smith? Maybe Smith was leading him into an ambush. It was not logical that a total stranger would work to get himself thrown into jail in order to help him. Ed's doubt grew. Had Big Jim Hawkins engineered it so Smith would break jail and then, from ambush, Big Jim could kill a gent named Ed Jones? Maybe he had fallen for a slick plan engineered by Hawkins.

There was this grim possibility, and Ed gave it proper scrutiny. He decided that he would watch Will Smith carefully. If Smith showed any signs of trying to doublecross him, Ed knew he would kill him. The main thing, though, was plain: He had managed to break jail. They would never get him back...alive. He vowed that with a grim intensity.

He realized his back was to Smith. If Smith were working for Hawkins, the man could shoot him from behind, then claim he had tried to keep him, Ed, from breaking jail. He swung in behind Smith. "Where are these horses?" His voice sounded hoarse.

"Over there. Against those cottonwood trees."

The horses were across the street. To reach them they would have to cross the lighted street. Lamplight glistened from buildings, showing the dusty strip with naked clarity. The cottonwood

trees stood in a vacant lot; Ed could barely discern them. He could not see a horse at their bases; the night was too dark. Doubt again gnawed with rat-sharp teeth. "We gotta cross the strip, Smith. You lead the way, savvy?"

The harshness of his voice evidently betrayed his suspicions. Smith hesitated, said, "Well, I guess you got a right to be suspicious. Here goes, Ed!"

Will Smith darted across the street like a lizard scared by a rattlesnake. Ed waited until the man had gained the other side, then he started out. He ran as if the devil was chasing him with a hot pitchfork. Up the street he heard a door slam. Then a voice hollered, "Hey, there goes the killer—Ed Jones! Get him, somebody! Get him!"

Ed recognized the voice immediately. Big Jim Hawkins! He heard the roar of a pistol, saw a flash up the street. Crouched, he shot back. Now another pistol came into the fray. Any moment Ed expected a bullet to hit him; he had ten feet to go, then five—he burst into the darkness.

"That was Hawkins!" Will Smith gritted his words. "Of all the tough luck— There's your sorrel, Ed."

The horse was saddled and ready for the trail. Will Smith was mounting a black horse and Ed recognized him as a Cinchring bronc—one of Mary Maloney's horses. What the—? But this was no place to loaf. He snagged a stirrup and went into the saddle, rifle in hand. Behind him the town was roaring to life. Men ran and hollered, and across town a rifle talked three times. Somebody was shooting wildly. Ed did not even hear the bullets. His bronc's hoofs, and the hoofs of Will Smith's cayuse, were making too much noise.

Doubt and suspicion still lurked with the bony cowpuncher. Will Smith had crossed that street without danger; he, in turn, had been shot at... He remembered shooting at the men in front of Hawkins' *El Dorado Saloon*. He had hit one, for he had seen the man stumble and fall. Well, another mark against him... But little difference one more mark meant...

Smith's bronc kicked gravel into Ed's face. He bent low over fork, his cayuse running with loose reins as he trailed Smith's Cinchring bronc. He almost rode over a townsman. The man came running out his back door, a rifle in hand. Lamplight streaming through the open door showed his wild-looking face.

Ed shot low, the bullets hitting gravel. The man stopped, stood terrified, then whirled on wooden legs. He almost dived into the doorway. The door slammed, and one man was out of the fray.

Again, Ed heard the same rifle talking. He got the impression that somebody was shooting at the Hawkins' crowd. From between two buildings, he saw the flare of a sixshooter. He heard the roar. He raised his rifle, shot toward the flare. He figured he missed. Then, he was past the ambusher.

Will Smith said, "He—he got me, Ed!"

For the first time, Ed noticed that the thin man was riding slumped in saddle, gun dangling from his limp hand. The ambusher had shot Smith. Ed thought, *Well, if he was leading me into a gun-trap, he got paid for his dirty work.* He spurred close to Smith's plunging black.

"Can you make it, Smith?"

"I gotta—I gotta—"

They were on the outskirts of the town and the night was hiding them. Ed turned on stirrups, glancing back. He saw a rider suddenly spur out of an alley, heading the opposite direction. Something seemed to tell him that this was the rifleman who had fired at the Hawkins bunch. Now the horseman was evidently attempting to put up a decoy that would pull the Hawkins gunman after him, and allow Ed and Smith to make a getaway.

Lamplight from a window showed the rider momentarily. For one second, Ed Jones saw the horse—a big bay that ran with a long stride. He saw the flash of lamplight on a rifle barrel, and then he saw the rider's face. The rider's Stetson lay on her back, the throat strap holding it. Ed almost gasped. "Mary Maloney!"

"A decoy," Smith grunted. "We had it planned. They got me, Ed—through the ribs. That girl is in a dangerous spot. She's trying to pull them away from us—I warned her not to risk it—"

"If they harm her," Ed gritted, "Hawkins will die, Smith."

Ed heard Mary holler, "Come on, Ed; come on, Smith. This way, and hurry." And then her voice and her hoofbeats were out of hearing.

ED FELT MEAN, low. He remembered how he had mistrusted her. And she, in return, had had a horse staked out for a getaway, and had decoyed the Hawkins men into trailing her, thereby giving him and Will Smith a chance to make a getaway.

He would have a lot of apologizing to do when next he met her.

But what if they killed her. That thought, hammering at his brain, drove blood out of his heart. No, he couldn't think of that possibility! His thoughts came back to the present when he heard Will Smith say, "Ride close to me, Ed, and watch that I don't fall."

Ed spurred his sorrel close. Smith clung to leather, one arm dangling; Ed took the man's short-gun. He crammed it under his own belt. No pursuit came. Mary's ruse had proven successful. They rode for what seemed hours although Ed knew it was only for minutes. They were on the rimrock when Smith said, "I gotta leave this bronc; help me, Ed."

"I sure will, pard."

Ed got the man on the ground. Moonlight was spilling across the Montana rangelands, but it was not soft—it was harsh and glaring, Ed thought. He laid Will Smith on his back. He tore off the man's shirt and his fingers got bloody. Their broncs stood with heads down, flanks heaving from their wild run. There were the sounds of the panted breathing, the stillness of the night. Ed thumbed a match to life, hoping the high sandstones around them would curtain the light from any watching eyes.

Will Smith had stopped a slug on his right ribs. It had broken a couple of ribs, Ed figured, for they gave to the pressure of his thumb. But the bullet had gone straight through.

"Wipe the blood off it," Smith gritted, eyes closed. "Then on my saddle you'll find a medicine kit in my left saddlebag. There's some bandages there and some iodine."

"This will hurt, Smith."

"I can take it, Ed."

Ed daubed the wound with iodine. Smith gritted his teeth. Then, without warning, his wiry body went limp.

Ed felt along the man's throat until he found a pulse. The heart was strong. Smith had passed out from pain.

Ed dressed the wound, face grim.

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ED WENT through Smith's saddle-bags. He found nothing that could point to the man's occupation or identity. He found some needles and some thread, a pair of fence pliers, and other things a bachelor would pack in his saddle-bags. He restored the medical-kit to its proper place and returned to where the man lay in the shadows. He knelt beside Smith.

Again his fingers found the man's pulse. He could not find the heart-beat, so he felt higher on Smith's throat; still,

he could find no pounding of blood through the man's artery.

He took Smith's wrist. His fingers trembled, found nothing; he lay his hand over the man's heart. For a moment he crouched there, moonlight etching him: he was big, tough, strong. Then, slowly, he stood up.

He stared down at Smith.

Then, without warning, he turned quickly, short-gun in hand. Behind him a boot had made a noise. His gun covered the figure that had come out of the sandstone boulders. "Jes' stand where you are—put up your hands—"

"This is Mary, Ed!"

"Mary!"

He heard her low laugh. "Yes, Mary Maloney; I was the one who was shooting at the Hawkins' men down in Moose City—"

"I know."

She stared at Smith. "He's wounded?"

"He's dead."

"He's—dead?" Her face, in the moonlight, looked s t r a i n e d, tense. "What happened, Ed?"

Ed told her.

She bit her lip. She looked down at the dead man and she had tears in her eyes. Ed put his arms around her. She was close to him, her young body firm against his, and he felt her tremble. Then, without warning, she stepped back, brusque and business-like.

"Ed, they tried to railroad you. I had to play like I was against you. I wanted information from Big Jim, and if he figured I had gone back on you—I didn't find out a thing, Ed."

"You sent Smith to get me out of jail?"

"Yes, we worked that out, together."

Ed Jones looked down on the man who had given his life so that he, Ed, might be free. He had a moment of red, terrible anger. Then by effort he controlled this, and he looked at Mary. "Who is Smith?"

"He didn't tell you, Ed?"

"No, he didn't."

"He's a military scout, Ed. Ed, think back. Remember a few days ago when you said that you had seen one of General Miles' scouts over on Frenchman Creek? How you knew him from the time you used to scout with Custer as a boy, and how you had talked to him—but he had been close-lipped and had told you little?"

"Yes, that was over a week ago. Why bring that up?"

Sitting Bull is in Canada. He is getting rifles and ammunition from the States. He's robbing over there—looting stages and railroads, farms, and cattle-spreads He's got money. The Mounties are after him and so is General Miles."

Ed nodded, eyes dark.

Ed remembered things. Little incidents. Army scouts were out, General Miles had his cavalry south at Fort Keogh, and Sitting Bull was getting ready for war again. Sitting Bull, from some unknown source, was getting U. S. rifles and U. S. ammunition.

He straightened, said, "We'd best hit leather again, girl."

"Where—to, Ed?"

"The Army has a camp up on Frenchman Creek. Miles had to wipe out those halfbreeds in there because they were smugglin' to Sitting Bull. But it looks to me like he jumped on some boys who weren't doing all the smuggling."

"I'll go with you."

HE DID NOT try to persuade the girl not to go with him; he was glad she was going to ride beside him. But he had to do something with Smith's body. He unsaddled the army scout's horse and turned him loose. Then he buried Smith in a shallow grave he and Mary dug out of the sand by their hands. He and the girl worked hard to dig out the grave. Finally they had the body in it and they piled some dirt and rocks over Smith. They hid his saddle back in the sandstones.

Ed said, "We'll come back, Smith."

Mary said nothing, sitting her bronc. They went down off the rimrock, horses sliding in shale; within a few minutes dawn would color this land. The whole thing was clear to Ed now. The drift-fence was the cause of all this trouble. But it did not involve cattle; it centered around rifles and ammunition. The problem was complete, the answer concise—now Ed needed help. Tall in leather, he led the way, heading across the basin toward the mouth of Frenchman Creek. Behind him came Mary, driving her horse for more speed.

Ed knew that Big Jim Hawkins and his gang were out to kill him. Dawn came, walking across this high range country, giving the buttes color and outlines, lighting the sage-and-greasewood flats. Ed rode with an eye peeled for trouble.

They rode unexpectedly on the two riders. Ed saw them first and he pulled in, hoofs scattering dust. Mary, a pace behind him, also jerked rein. Then the two saw them, and Ed heard one of them yelp, "There they are, Sig! The farmer an' the woman—over there—"

"Well, I'll be—!"

The first speaker shot; but his bullet, flung in haste, went wild. Ed made his .45 kick three times. The man screamed, his horse jumped; the man catapulted to the sod, and his bronc stampeded. The horse ran wildly, reins trailing, stirrups popping. But Ed had no eyes for the stampeding bronc.

His eyes—and his short-gun—covered the Hawkins man. And the gunman held his hands high. He had dropped his .45 and fear was livid in his eyes.

"Don't—kill me, Jones!" he whined.

Ed rode close, Mary following. "Get his rifle and his pistol, Mary." The girl dismounted, took the Winchester out of scabbard, picked up the .45. The man's small eyes followed her; he wet his thin lips.

Ed said, "How about the other gent, girl?"

Mary knelt beside the fallen gunman. Her hand went out to feel for a pulse and she finally looked up and shook her head.

Ed murmured, "He shot first."

The Hawkins' man said, "Big Jim is out to kill you, Jones. This is but another mark on the board against you. Us boys was jes' out on a peaceful ride—lookin' for some driftin' cattle."

"And packing guns, too," Ed supplied. "An' firin' at a body the minute he came into view. Try another tall one, Matthews."

Matthews wet his lips. Composure had wiped away fear and his face held color again. "You driftin' outa the country, Jones?"

Ed had a sudden hunch. "I'm leavin'. Matthews. Too much against me. The girl here will stay behind and sell my property for me and send me the money; tell Big Jim I know when I'm whipped."

"There's a life sentence at hard work starin' at you," Matthews said slowly. "Might be that if you skipped and got out of Big Jim's way, he might forgit all about it. Yep, recollect he said somethin' like that last night; he's a forgivin' gent, Big Jim is."

"Very nice fellow," Ed said, cynically.

Matthews looked at him. He looked at Mary. Then his eyes swung back to Ed Jones. "Kin I ride now?"

"Ride out fast," Ed said sharply.

Matthews used his spurs. His bronc kicked dust and rock and then the man was riding around a hill, bent in saddle and with haste pounding him across the flanks. Ed had to smile at the man's wild retreat. Matthews had fear with him in his saddle. Then this smile died before the futility of the moment. Maybe the wise thing to do would be to ride out.

Big odds—overwhelming o d d s—were against him.

He might get killed. He had a life-sentence over him. If captured alive he might hear that sentence changed from life to a death penalty; he had just killed a Hawkins man.

HE PULLED air into his lungs—good, clean air. Free air. He was free, and if he jerked stakes and left—Then he remembered his little ranch. Again, in his mind's eye, he saw the spread—the house, the barns, the new corrals. The only spot on God's earth where he wanted to live.

"Let's hit leather, Mary."

"For the Frenchman country?"

"Yes, and the scouts there. We need help. They need to know what we have found out. We'll stop Sitting Bull and Hawkins at the same time."

"How about this—dead man?"

"Hawkins' chore." Ed was brusque. "He worked for Hawkins; he slung a gun for Hawkins. Big Jim can take the corpse."

Her face was too pale; her lips trembled, but she said nothing. Then they were riding across the basin toward the northwest and the mouth of Frenchman Creek. When they topped a small rise Ed saw the fire.

He drew in, heart pounding. Etched by the dawn, he raised his right hand and pointed—a ghostly figure sitting a heaving horse.

"Fire, Mary!"

"Your—your ranch, Ed!"

When Ed Jones finally spoke, his words had a quiet deadliness. "Yes, my spread. Makes a high fire, too." Irony colored his words and gave them a harsh hue. "Hawkins has torched the outfit; he's trying to suck me in and kill me. But for once the fellow is going to get fooled, Mary. I'm not riding over there into his trap."

"That drift fence is the cause of it all," Mary said.

Ed nodded. "The drift-fence," he repeated.

For some moments they sat saddles and watched the fire rage. Although across the basin, the flames were clear. Smoke rolled high and fire lanced upward. Then the first savage outburst died and became a steady glow. Only then did Ed Jones rein his bronc around and ride again.

Hawkins had loaded on the straw that had broken the camel's back. And Mary, glancing at Ed's stern face, read that fact. She got her horse close and his arm went around her, pulling her in. He looked down at her sweet face, felt the push of her firm and full body and, despite their being on horseback, he kissed her long and roughly. Then they were apart.

"Thank God for you, Mary."

"And for you, too, Ed."

Ed said, "I feel better now... When you have a pal beside you, you can whip the world. We'll work with the scouts and when Hawkins tries to run guns again, we'll nab him."

General Miles' scouts had been camped at the point where Frenchman Creek came into the basin. When Ed had visited the camp, three scouts had been camped there; now, not one was alive. Their bodies lay around a dead fire. Their lean-to shelter, built back in the cottonwood trees, was down—ripped apart by rough hands. Ed dismounted, but Mary stayed on horseback. And the horror of the scene was plain in the girl's eyes.

"Sioux?" she breathed.

Ed had looked for sign. "Sioux don't wear boots," he said; "there are boot-tracks back in the brush." He looked at her. "Big Jim Hawkins' work, I'd say. He's mad for money."

"What will we do? We need help?"

Ed debated, face calm. A fly buzzed around the bloated body of a dead scout. "Miles has another camp down the river about sixty miles. You ride there and get help and bring men back."

"And you?"

"I stay here—and I fight Big Jim Hawkins!"

- 5 -

BIG JIM HAWKINS leaned back and put his thumbs in his vest. He rolled his cigar, his mind busy. Then, apparently satisfied with his thoughts, he went to the window and looked out on the dirty mainstreet. But his eyes did not see this mainstreet; his eyes were looking down a street in Buenos Aires.

He went over the whole setup. His ranch was sold and it had brought a good price; the eastern buyer would be in next week to take possession. He had that money, and more—and another load of rifles and ammunition was being unloaded on the north bank of the Missouri, about forty miles south. His men were loading those rifles onto pack mules for the trek north into Canada.

He thought of Ed Jones.

Four days had passed since Jones had made his escape. Big Jim Hawkins chewed on his cigar viciously now as he remembered the tongue-lacing he had given Marshal Newton. He had run Newton out of town and now one of his own men toted the marshal-badge.

Where was Ed Jones?

Had Jones left the country? And where was Mary Maloney? Had she gone with Jones? She was not at her ranch; her old foreman was running the spread. Nobody seemed to know where she was—or nobody knew the whereabouts of Jones, too.

A man entered. "The mules are loaded, Big Jim. They're comin' through the badlands. We'll move them across the line tomorrow night."

Big Jim nodded. "That drift-fence?"

"Cut from hell to breakfast; it won't hinder us from movin' stuff north again. Dang that nester, he run that fence right across the trail—"

"You repeat yourself," Big Jim snarled.

The man, a heavy-shouldered fellow, hesitated.

Big Jim asked, "Anybody see anythin' of Jones?"

"We seen a rider driftin' south a day ago; crossed the river at Cow Island. Looked like Ed Jones pullin' out."

Hawkins held his cigar between thumb and forefinger. Unconsciously he rolled it slowly. "You *think* it was Jones? Why ain't you sure?"

"He was too far away. I used field glasses on him but couldn't be sure; anyway, he swum the Missouri, and went on south."

Big Jim nodded, eyes somber, thoughtful. "Get out, fella. I'll meet you tomorrow afternoon in the rough country. Same place."

"You'll help us run the guns through?"

"I go through with every shipment, don't I?"

The man nodded, then turned and left. Big Jim restored his cigar to his mouth and smiled.

That afternoon, flanked by three gunmen, Big Jim Hawkins left town. First he went to the burned-down spread belonging to Ed Jones. He looked at the ashes, then at the drift-fence. He had had a four-horse team pull the drift-fence out. Wires were bent and broken, diamond-willow posts had been snapped.

He thought of Ed Jones. Jones was the big puzzle; had he really left the country?

From a butte, Ed Jones watched through field-glasses. Back in the rocks lay Marshal Newton, tied hand-and-foot. Newton's face was swollen, both eyes almost closed; his eyes glistened, they were so black and blue. Ed had worked him over with his fists. Ed would not admit it, but his knuckles ached...

He had learned practically nothing from Newton. Big Jim Hawkins had

told Newton very little; he had used the ex-lawman only for a stooge. Ed had really wasted his wind—and knuckles—on Newton.

Ed knew that the mule-train was ready to move. He had been the rider that the Hawkins man had glimpsed. Sunlight reflecting on glass had told him he was being watched so, to make his ruse complete, he had deliberately crossed the Missouri, a rider apparently drifting south.

Where was Mary?

By this time the girl should have returned with some of General Miles' men. But...she had not returned. Within Ed Jones was a gnawing ugly fear for her safety. First, there were the Sioux—the renegade Sioux. Occasionally they slipped below the Line on forays. Had she run into a war-party? If she had, her scalp would now be dangling from a lodge-pole. That was a terrible thought.

Many times since she had left, Ed had felt bitter remorse. He should not have allowed her to make the ride. If anything happened to her— He almost groaned aloud. But he had to have hope.

Big Jim and his gunmen rode back to Moose City. Ed untied the lawman, said, "Ride out if you want to; Big Jim run across you, and he'll kill you. Get out of my sight—I'm sick of lookin' at you."

"Give me my rifle?"

"You don't need a rifle. Get out!"

Newton swung on him, face torn by rage; he hit Ed in the mouth. Ed went to work with a cold, terrible anger. He broke Newton's nose and knocked him out. Then he rode away and left the unconscious man on the rimrock. He rode south. He scouted, found the mule-trail, followed it north. That night it camped in the badlands south of Moose City. All day the mules grazed, men loafed—that night packs went into place, diamond hitches were made. And the mules went north, rifles and ammunition tied down on them.

Big Jim Hawkins joined the mule-train. He rode a black stallion. Ed watched, anxiety in him: Could he stop this train by himself? Why didn't Mary come with soldiers? Lord in Heaven, was she dead...

Ed prayed on his knees, back there in the rocks. After praying he felt better, but still he cursed himself for sending her on the long ride. He followed the train, keeping on the high ridges. The moon rose with swiftness, lighting the country with great clarity. Within an hour, the mules would leave the basin, going through the canyon his drift-fence had blocked.

ED LOOKED east. No riders against the moonlit horizon; he had to do it alone. He decided to let the mules go through. One man couldn't turn the mules and the riders who headed for the pack-train; but one man could kill Big Jim Hawkins. And Ed Jones had made up his mind. He hated to think of killing a man, but he had made his compromise: He would kill Big Jim or Big Jim would kill him.

At midnight, the mules were entering the canyon, going into its black mouth. Big Jim rode behind the train, evidently scouting a rear attack. He was taking no chances. He evidently intended to station himself at the mouth of the canyon and see that nobody trailed his pack-train.

He kept a gunman with him. Ed knew the man. Ed waited; the pack-train went out of sight and hearing, and he came down off the rimrock on foot.

Once his boot dislodged a rock that rolled a few feet before he caught it and stopped it.

He listened. No bullets came his way; they had not heard the rock roll.

Ed killed the bodyguard; he did it with a rock. He came in from behind, his arm lifted and swung; the rock smashed in the man's skull. Ed heard the skull crunch and the man fell. He had not had time to say a word.

Ed slowly placed the rock on the ground so it would make no noise. He

was crouched like that when Big Jim came behind him.

Big Jim said, "All right, fellow, get to your boots! And forgit you own a gun, savvy!"

Ed remained crouched, frozen. Fear was with him, tying him into knots. He swallowed, looked over his shoulder. Moonlight etched his dirty, whiskery face. Moonlight identified him. "Ed Jones, eh?"

Ed got up, hands out from his sides. He looked at Big Jim's Winchester. He looked at Big Jim. Both hated the other. This hate lay between them, and it was diamond hard; it glistened. "You walk on quiet boots, Hawkins!"

"Jones, I'm killin' you!"

The rifle rose. It came up, the hammer fell; the bullet hit Ed in the ribs. The bullet had the force of a swinging sledgehammer. It hit Ed so hard it drove him to one side; Big Jim missed his second shot. Then Ed's bullet, coming up, grazed Big Jim Hawkins' hand.

Then Ed Jones stood there, trembling wildly. He looked at Hawkins and felt no elation; he couldn't kill an unconscious man. He was sick inside, his chest on fire. The roar died down, and then, from up the canyon, came the sound of rifles. Ed tried to turn and fell down.

Suddenly, mules roared by, almost tromping him. He got on his hands and knees and crept into the brush. He put his back against a rock and watched through a haze. A mule kicked at Big Jim and he heard the man's skull break under the impact of the steel shod hoof.

Big Jim's men poured by, and one fell from saddle. Ed watched with a cold detachment; he seemed a thing apart—he was far away, just a spectator. And he was sitting there when Mary rode down from the rimrock.

"Ed, oh, Ed? Where are you?"

"Here, Mary."

She was beside him, then. She was asking about him, and he asked her questions—she had had to ride further down the river, for the scouts had moved. Soldiers came up, the fight was over; a man worked on Ed Jones. And Mary was beside Ed, her hand on his head.

"Well, we won, Ed. The drift-fence—he wanted it out so his mule-trains could move north—he was deep in the smuggling game."

Ed looked at her. "Let's not talk about it, Mary."

"What shall we—talk about?"

"This army doc says I'll be well soon. Ribs busted."

"What shall we talk about?"

"Us," Ed said.

She kissed him, her lips warm and clinging. Then she whispered, "Yes, about *us*, Ed."

★

Don't Fail to Read

COULD YOU SAVE A LIFE?

in the November issue of

POPULAR MEDICINE

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Once Flint Steele had been an ordinary citizen; that was before he'd been elected sheriff. Now Steele thought he was the law in person, and the law must be enforced to the letter — even if his own son faced the hangman!

HEADS UP!

Novelet of Ruthless Justice

by W. C. TUTTLE

THE TALL, gaunt man turned his head slowly and looked at the woman and her two small children, as the three moved aside and almost against the wall of a building, the woman brushing them on ahead of her, like an old hen trying to protect her brood. One of the children hesitated to look back at him, but got a cuff that sent him ahead, stumbling.

The woman didn't speak to him, although he had known her for years. He was like a stranger in his own home town, avoided by everybody. Arthur Colby Steele, sheriff of Agua Frio. His first two names were long forgotten. "Flint" Steele—and he didn't get that nickname from being kind and gentle. As he stood there, staring after the woman, his jaw tight, he could hear the sound of hammers on wood. After a few moments of bitter reflections, he went on, his high-heeled boots sounding hollowly on the wooden sidewalk.

Flint Steele had been an ordinary run-of-the-mill citizen of Agua Frio until he had been elected sheriff two years ago. It was a rebirth of Doctor Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde in the desert. He became obsessed with the idea that *he* was the law, and with a perfect right to administer it in his own way.

He went away for a week, and came back with a bride, half his age—a kindly, gentle girl, daughter of an old, crippled cowman, whose ranch was two hundred miles away from Agua Frio. Flint Steele had a son, Harry, nearly as old as his stepmother, a happy-go-lucky young cowboy, whom everybody liked—in spite of the fact that he was Flint Steele's son.

There was nothing picturesque nor attractive about Agua Frio; just a huddle of sand-blasted, wooden buildings in the midst of the desert hills, which looked like a dirty, gray blanket tossed carelessly over broken hunks of granite.

Harry Steele liked Ann. A stepmother of his own age. And because Harry liked Ann and showed her every consideration, Steele became jealous. It caused several minor clashes, but nothing serious. Flint was also jealous of Johnny Riley, his deputy. Not because of anything that Johnny did, but because Johnny was nice to Ann—and because Johnny was young, ruggedly handsome, and very efficient. One big reason why Steele kept Johnny Riley

The sheriff was having a scaffold prepared for the hanging of his own son.

was because Johnny had the nerve of a grizzly and was the fastest man in the valley with a sixshooter. Flint believed in force.

Perhaps Steele had an inferiority complex. At any rate, he browbeat people; and what was worse, he mistreated prisoners, Johnny knew that he also mistreated Ann, but she never complained. He also knew that letters came each week for her from her father, and he also knew that Ann never got the letters.

The climax came when Harry was arrested for murdering Ben Claridge, another youngish cowboy, following a dispute over a poker game. Claridge was shot in the back, as he started to mount his horse at a hitchrack at night.

THE JURY said he was guilty, and the judge sentenced him to hang. Slim McFall, foreman of the jury gasped, "My God, I thought the judge would send him to the pen—not hang him!"

No one wanted Harry to hang. Ben Claridge had never been a local favorite; and it also meant that Steele would have to hang his own son. This fact was brought more forcibly to the town, when men started to build the scaffold behind the jail.

One of the oldtimers said, "And Flint Steele was out there, tellin' the carpenters jist where to brace the damn thing. I know it's the verdict of the law, but the least he could do would be to hightail it out of this country, and let somebody else do the job."

FLINT STEELE walked into his own modest cottage, threw his hat and a newspaper down beside the table, and sat down. Ann was in the little kitchen, but neither of them called to the other. It was a small living room, which they were obliged to use as both living and dining room. On a rough table against the wall was a canary in a cheap wooden cage, and the bird was singing loudly. Steele looked grimly at the bird, as Ann came in, bringing a pot of coffee.

Flint merely grunted at her, and reached for the pot. As she started back to the kitchen he lifted the coffee pot, swung his arm back and hurled the pot at the cage.

His aim was all too good, and the smashed cage was flung against the wall, coffee spattering all over the room. Ann cried out sharply, as she turned and ran over to pick up what was left of the fragile wooden cage. The little, yellow bird was only a small gob of coffee-splattered feathers now.

Ann came closer to him, the wrecked cage in her two hands. He looked at her grimly, waiting. "You killed him," she accused huskily.

"Good," he said quietly. "Maybe I can have some peace and quiet around this house now."

Ann looked helplessly at him, her eyes filled with loathing. "Peace!" she said wearily. "Flint Steele, you don't want peace. All you want to do is hurt somebody—kill somebody."

Flint looked grimly at her, possibly unable to defend himself for the moment. In the quiet they could hear the far-off sound of hammering. Ann seemed to flinch a little, her hands trembling.

"So I don't want peace, eh?" he remarked.

"No, you don't. Before they elected you sheriff of this godforsaken county you were a different man. All you want to do now is hurt somebody. You may be the law of Agua Frio—but they hate you—all of them."

"So they hate me, do they? I'm the only sheriff they ever had who upheld the law—the only man with the nerve to do it. Well, for your information, I'm goin' to keep right on enforcin' it."

Steele got to his feet, reached down and took his hat from the floor. He looked at her indignantly, as he yanked the battered sombrero over his eyes. "Where's that newspaper I brought in here?"

"You had your feet on it under the table," she replied wearily.

He raked the paper out with his foot and picked it up. He started to fold it up, but hesitated as a short item on the page caught his eye. Swiftly he read it, his eyes blazing with anger. Ann was looking at him, as he slammed the paper down on the table.

"This is a fine deal!" he gasped. "Dave Sells escaped from the pen seven weeks ago—and I have to find it out from a newspaper! A rancher near Painted Rock swears he seen him—and—yeah, that's fine! Sells swore he'd get loose from the penitentiary and kill me—and them dirty crooks at the penitentiary never notified me that he escaped."

Steele flung the offending paper across the room and stalked out of the house. Ann looked at the tiny bunch of feathers in the cage and shook her head sadly. "You were the only happy

thing in this house—and he hates happiness," she said quietly.

OLD ANDY ORR, depot agent for the stage line, looked up from his perusal of the Painted Rock Post, and saw the sheriff looking through the wicket at him. Old Andy didn't like Flint, but he tried to be pleasant. "What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"Will you look in the book where you register telegrams and see if one came for me about seven weeks ago?"

Andy squinted at the calendar on the wall thoughtfully. "Seven weeks ago, huh? Hm-m-m-m! Make it about the tenth of June. That's right—long about that time." Andy looked up from the book. "Didja read about Dave Sells bein' seen in Painted Rock?"

"Never mind that," growled Flint. "Look for that telegram."

"Oh, yeah—sure. Lemme see-e-e—"

Andy thumbed a few pages, and grinned his satisfaction. "Got it!" he declared. "Eleventh. Yeah, here it is."

"Read it, you putterin' old fool!" snapped Flint anxiously.

Andy turned the book around and shoved it over to the sheriff. "If you're so damned anxious—read it yourself!"

Steele gave Andy a withering glance, but the old man had turned away. The telegram was there, notifying the sheriff that Dave Sells had escaped and might come to the valley again.

"Who did you deliver this message to?" asked the sheriff.

Andy turned from filling his pipe, and squinted thoughtfully. "Ain't sure," he replied. "You or Johnny Riley. Mebbe neither of you was there, and I left it on your desk—I dunno."

Flint Steele turned on his heel and stalked out. A certain angle had struck him, and he walked stiff-legged down to his office, ignoring the people on the street. This was the showdown.

JOHNNY RILEY was seated near the sheriff's desk, perusing the *State Brand Register* when Flint stalked in. He stopped short and looked at Johnny, who looked up from the book. There was something in the attitude of the tall sheriff that told Johnny something was wrong. He got up nonchalantly, but perfectly alert, as the sheriff came forward a few steps and stopped again.

"Somethin' wrong?" asked Johnny easily.

"Plenty," replied Flint through tight lips. "About seven weeks ago a telegram was delivered to this office. It said that Dave Sells escaped from the prison." Flint paused to let this sink in with Johnny, before he said: "Why wasn't that telegram given to me?"

Johnny didn't answer. His right hand flexed a little.

Flint said, "I'll tell yuh why, Riley—you didn't want me to know that Sells was loose. Maybe you hoped he'd keep his threat—and you'd be the sheriff."

Still, Johnny had no reply. He unconsciously rubbed the palm of his right hand across his gun-belt, just at his thigh.

"Lost your voice?" asked Flint sarcastically.

"Maybe that's what I did," said Johnny. "If the folks of Agua Frio knew it, they'd give me a vote of thanks."

"They wanted law here," gritted Flint, "and I gave it to them. I've been an honest sheriff."

"Being honest is why you stole Ann's letters from her dad—and held out her letters to him?"

Flint's jaw tightened, his right hand swung free past the butt of his holstered gun. "You dirty snooper!"

"Go ahead and reach for your gun," invited Johnny.

"Might look bad—me killin' my own deputy."

Johnny laughed, but not with his eyes. He said, "Don't let that stop you, you crooked, hardheaded brute."

Both men were as unmoving as

statues, both waiting for the other to make the first break for a gun. The hammering was quite loud in there. "They're hurryin' to finish the scaffold, Steele—the scaffold where you're due to hang your own son at eight o'clock in the morning."

"I swore to do my duty," said Flint hoarsely. "I'm the law here. Harry broke the law—and he'll have to pay for it."

"Law?" queried Johnny. "Twelve knotheads who didn't have brains enough to come out of the rain. If this badge of mine keeps you from reachin' for a gun, take it back—and reach."

With his left hand, Johnny unpinned the badge and tossed it at the sheriff's feet. Flint shifted his eyes just long enough to locate the discarded badge, placed a foot over it, and ground the metal insignia deep into the pine floor.

"I'm not your deputy now," said Johnny, "but before you reach for your gun—for the last time—I'd like to have you know just what I think of you, Flint."

"I don't care what you nor any other man thinks."

"I'm not your deputy now—remember?" reminded Johnny.

Flint ignored it. "Why did you watch the mail?"

"Ann felt so badly over not hearing anything from her father that I watched the mail."

"You did, eh? I didn't realize I had a sneak for a deputy."

Johnny looked at him grimly. "Don't you think this is a case of the kettle calling the pot black? I can't figure out why Ann ever married you—a man twice her age and with no more conscience than a rattler."

"Get out of here before I shoot you!" flared the sheriff.

Johnny looked him over disgustedly and shook his head slowly.

"No man who treats his wife like a dog, and would hang his own son, has nerve enough to give another man an even break with a gun."

Johnny started backing toward the door, still facing the sheriff, where he delivered the prime insult. "I never take a chance on being shot in the back."

FLINT STEELE'S face was just a bit white as the door shut behind Johnny Riley. Down in his heart, Steele had to admit that he had been afraid to match draws with Johnny. He looked down at the brushed badge, poked it loose with his toe and kicked it under the desk. Then he walked out and locked the door behind him.

The three carpenters were discussing some detail of the scaffold as Steele came down the alley and stopped to look it over. The men merely looked at him as he said harshly, "You better get up that cross-bar, because I've got to stretch the rope tonight."

None of the three men made any reply. One of them looked over about thirty feet to the barred window at Harry's cell, tossed a piece of two-by-four aside and walked off the job, dangling his hammer in his hand. Flint Steele stared after the retreating figure of the carpenter, but had no comments. After a few moments he, too, walked away.

One of the carpenters attacked a board savagely with his saw.

"I know what you're thinkin'," said the other man quietly.

"You ain't thinkin' what I'm thinkin'," denied the other; "you wasn't here when he was elected. I voted for that damned cannibal."

There were several men and women standing at the sidewalk, as Steele came back down the alley. He knew all of them—had known most of them for years—but they merely moved aside and let him severely alone. One man half-whispered to another, "I'd think that damned hammerin' would

drive him crazy. Me and my woman are stuffin' our ears with cotton."

Later in the afternoon Johnny Riley walked into the *Eureka Saloon*. Johnny didn't drink—he just wanted to talk. There were only two people in the place, excepting the bartender. One man was at a poker table, his head buried in his arms, a bottle and glass beside him. Johnny stopped at him. He was Slim McFall, too drunk to lift his head. At the far end of the bar was a well-known figure, an advocate of temperance—Judge Woods. Johnny came up to the bar opposite the bartender, who looked very grim.

That Judge Woods was inebriated would not even have to be guesswork. One end of his usually-immaculate collar was unbuttoned, his severely black necktie-knot under one ear. Johnny looked the judge over in amazement. As far as Johnny knew, Judge Woods had never taken a drink; and here he was, soddenly drunk, owl-eyed, as he reached for his bottle and glass. Johnny looked at the bartender, who blinked at Johnny and shook his head.

AFTER A few moments of gazing at each other, the bartender's eyes shifted to Johnny's shirt-front.

"How come you ain't got no badge, Johnny?" whispered the bartender.

"I quit the job," replied Johnny shortly.

The bartender nodded and looked at the judge, who was spilling liquor on the bar instead of into his glass. The hammering was very plain in there. After taking another drink, Judge Woods put his left hand over his left ear and stood there, doing nothing.

"Judge is plumb deaf in his right ear," whispered the bartender.

"The hammerin' has got 'em, eh?" said Johnny.

"Got everybody, Johnny. Got me; I know that. Quit the job, huh?"

Johnny nodded and looked back, as the swinging doors flared back to admit a tall, gray-haired man, well-dressed. That he was intoxicated was evidenced by his indecision, as he balanced himself on his feet and tried to line up his eyesight toward the bar. Johnny took a deep breath and whispered, "Albert Baker, prosecutor extraordinary! Since when did he take to wobble-juice?"

"Good gosh!" gasped the bartender. "He's drunk as a sheepherder!"

Albert Baker, laboring in heavy seas, advanced slowly. He stopped at the table where Slim McFall was sprawled, looked him over with owl-eyes and finally patted Slim on the shoulder before coming on toward the bar.

The bartender moved over facing the lawyer, as he came to anchor about midway of the long bar, tried to put a foot on the rail; it slipped off three times and he gave up the idea.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Baker?" asked the bartender.

The lawyer's voice was weak, his tongue too thick. "Notta damn thing. All I want is—is someth'n t' lean on."

"Help yourself to the bar. Sure you don't want a drink?"

There was a decided thud; they all turned to look at Judge Woods, who had possibly turned around, lost his balance and was sitting on the bar-rail, his hat down over his face. The upset bottle of whisky was running a small stream down on the judge, but he didn't seem to mind. If the lawyer recognized the judge he didn't say. He surged away from the bar, almost fell down, but managed to stand straight and with great dignity, as he said, "Mos' dis—disgrasheful," and charted an erratic course out of the saloon.

"How about a drink, Johnny," urged the bartender.

"You know I don't drink."

"Neither did the judge nor prosecutor."

"That's right; but I resigned—they couldn't."

"No," admitted the bartender quietly, "they couldn't."

"Slim McFall don't count," said Johnny. "He always drank."

"He was foreman of the jury," pointed out the bartender. "He voted for first-degree murder."

The hammering seemed louder now. Johnny shoved away from the bar and walked out. He wanted to talk with Ann and tell her just why he resigned. Flint Steele saw Johnny going down toward his home, and followed. From the corner he saw Johnny going up to the house, where Ann was standing on the little porch. Instead of going down there, Flint made a short circle and came in past his little stable and around to a corner near the porch, where he flattened against the wall, listening intently. Johnny and Ann were only a few feet away.

Johnny said, "Ann, how on earth did you ever marry Flint Steele?"

"Oh, I don't know, Johnny—it just happened. Dad didn't like it. He hasn't written to me for ages, but I write once a week."

"You didn't know he had been married before?"

"Not until I met Harry."

"Ann, he hit you again today—your eye is discolored."

"He was angry about that telegram," she said. "I think he was mad because you resigned, too."

"Well, why do you stay here, Ann? Good gosh, you don't have to live with a brute like him."

Ann was almost in tears, as she replied painfully, "How could I get away, Johnny? I haven't any money. Flint has warned the stage drivers to not let me ride, and he has ordered the man at the livery-stable to not let me have a horse or buggy."

"Good Lord, I didn't know that! But, Ann there's a lot of folks who would help you. Oh, I know—they're afraid of Flint Steele—and none of them dare come here. But, Ann, I'm not afraid of him."

FLINT STEELE stepped around the corner. Ann had started to say something, but jerked a hand up to her mouth. Johnny saw him, too, but never moved except to drop his right hand close to his gun.

"Don't reach for a gun, you snooper!" snapped Flint. "I ain't packin' a gun right now."

"Playin' safe, eh?" remarked Johnny, alert to any trick.

"I didn't suppose you was dirty enough to try and get my wife to run away with you."

"She wasn't asked to run away with me," denied Johnny warmly. "All I wanted her to do was get away—back to her father—go some place where you can't hit her."

"Take off that belt and gun, Riley—and I'll beat your head off."

Johnny didn't argue; he took off his belt and gun, placing them carefully on the top step of the porch. As he turned to Flint, he spoke sharply to Ann. "Better get up on the porch—this might get rough."

Steele laughed. He was bigger than Johnny—taller and much heavier; also, no man had ever knocked him off his feet. Johnny knew all this—but wasn't afraid at all.

There was no preliminary action. Steele, loaded with pent-up emotions, dived at Johnny, swinging a slashing right. It was Flint's initial mistake, electing to finish the battle with one punch. Johnny easily avoided the huge fist, and as the big sheriff went off-balance Johnny hit him three times in the face, knocking Flint back on his heels, blinded with two of the blows which landed high on his cheek-bones.

Johnny didn't waste any time; he took two wavering punches on his face as Flint tried to keep him away, and proceeded to knock Flint down with a right to the chin. Flint was

down, but not out. One of his huge hands grasped Johnny's ankle and yanked him over on the ground. Before Johnny could extricate himself, the bigger man piled onto him, pounding short blows to Johnny's face. But Johnny was not without some wrestling skill. He spun away, breaking Flint's hold, and came to his feet.

Bellowing threats Flint regained his feet; but this time Johnny stepped in driving rights and lefts to Flint's face and body. It was more than even Flint Steele could stand, and he went down almost on the porch steps. This time he didn't get up.

Johnny stood there, looking him over. Ann, upon the porch, white-faced, watched what Johnny was going to do next.

Flint was trying to get up when Johnny walked around the corner of the house, and came back with Flint's belt and gun. He dropped them on the steps beside him, and the sheriff looked at him blankly.

Johnny pointed at the belt and gun. "Next time try using your gun," he said. "It won't hurt half as much."

The sheriff seemed undecided what to do, but finally picked up his belt and gun. He started to buckle on the belt but changed his mind and walked down to the little gate, carrying it in his hand. He didn't even look back. Johnny said, "Ann, I'm sorry it happened."

Then Johnny turned and followed the sheriff. The sound of their fading bootheels on the wooden sidewalk was taken over by the hammering. Ann put her hands over her ears and went into the house.

THE TOWN of Painted Post was twenty miles from Agua Frio; twenty miles of twisting desert and desert hill road. Painted Rock was a little bigger than Agua Frio, and was on the railroad. The old Painted Rock —Agua Frio stage was being loaded for its trip to Agua Frio. Old "Dad" Grimes, the driver, was taking care of the light load and arguing with himself audibly.

A man rode past, sitting stiffly in his saddle, hat pulled low over his eyes. In garb he was an ordinary puncher of the desert wastes, but in reality he was Dave Sells, erstwhile inmate of the penitentiary.

Sells dismounted in front of the bank, glanced at his watch. It was still a few minutes of three o'clock as he walked casually into the bank.

Jim Worth, city marshal of Painted Rock, came up to the stage and watched Dad Grimes loading.

Dad dusted off his hands on his overalls and looked at Worth. "I hate to go back to Agua Frio," he said. "Whole d a d - b l a m e d town's sad. They're goin' to hang Harry Steele in the mornin'."

"What else could Flint do?" asked the marshal. "The law says he's got to do it."

"What else could he do?" parroted Dad. "He could give Harry a horse and a gun and give him an hour headstart."

"You'd make a fine peace officer," grinned the marshal. "I've got an invitation to attend the hangin'."

"Invitation?" gasped Dad. "Invitation to see a man hung? Of all the dadblamed things I ever heard tell about! You ain't goin', are yuh, Jim?"

"Nope," grinned the marshal. "I sent word to Flint that as long as Dave Sells is loose and around here, I better stay on the job."

Dad Grimes nodded soberly. "I read that in the paper. Do you think Sells really came back here?"

"With everybody lookin' for him, he'd be a fool to show up."

From down the street came the thudding reports of pistol shots inside a building, followed almost immediately by more shots, but out on the street. Sells was backing off the sidewalk,

shooting at the open doorway of the bank. Then he swung into his saddle and galloped down the street, while men converged in behind him, going into the bank. The marshal was running down the sidewalk toward the bank.

Old Dad Grimes shook his head slowly, watching the crowd. "It kinda looks to me as though Dave Sells *was* a fool," he said to no one in particular.

A cowboy came running up past the depot, heading for his horse.

"Dave Sells!" he yelled at Dad. "Shot Henry Leslie, the cashier, and got away with plenty money."

"And headin' south," remarked Dad to himself. "Mebbe he's on his way to Agua Frio for a short visit with Flint Steele."

Jim Worth and his posse pulled out of Painted Post just ahead of the stage to Agua Frio.

FLINT STEELE was more or less frustrated. With only two men on the scaffolding job, the work was slowed down badly. He tried to get more help, but none was available. He wanted a man to help him take an anvil from the blacksmith shop to the scaffold, but there was no man willing to help him; so he had to load the heavy anvil into a wheelbarrow and take it over there himself. Even the two carpenters looked at him indifferently when he asked them to help him put the anvil on the platform, and walked back to their work.

Flint cursed them back several generations, after which he managed the job alone. He was dragging it over to the square trap-door hole, when Andy Orr, the depot agent came, bearing a telegram. He handed it to Flint and turned away.

"Better wait for an answer," growled the sheriff.

"Won't be none," replied Andy, and walked off the platform.

The telegram was from Painted Post, telling him of the robbery and shooting by Dave Sells. The last sentence cause Flint Steele to shut his jaw tightly. It said: HE'S HEADING SOUTH TOWARD AGUA FRIO WITH THE POSSE BEHIND HIM.

Steele walked off the platform and went back to the street. Ordinarily he would have had a deputy, and there were plenty of men in Agua Frio to help him watch for Dave Sells; but not now. The sheriff of Agua Frio was on his own.

It was just after sundown when Dave Sells, heading into a country he knew very well, suddenly discovered that he was also decidedly on his own. Discounting the fact that Jim Worth, marshal of Painted Rock could, and would, form a posse to pursue him, he grew careless about watching his backtrail, and got caught in a canyon, where he was working his way back to the main road.

Sells used up a lot of his meager ammunition, and when he got free he had exactly seven cartridges left for his sixshooter. The humiliating part of the episode to Dave Sells was the fact that the posse killed his horse, and it happened that the loot from the bank was tied to that saddle. Dave Sells landed on his hands and knees when the horse went down, and he had no time to untie the sack from the saddle.

It was a rough, almost impassible part of the country, and Sells managed to avoid being seen again by the posse, burrowing deeply into the rocks and brush. The posse found the horse and the money, which was a source of satisfaction to them, but Jim Worth wanted Dave Sells. He told his men, "Sells is on foot. He's got to get to water—and there ain't none nearer than Painted Rock. We'll spread out and stay all night. He won't try for the road. Keep your eyes open—and don't shoot each other."

THE FINAL touches to the scaffold were finished by lanternlight, and

the two weary carpenters went home, leaving Flint Steele to hang the heavy anvil on the new rope. It creaked as it swayed in the trap-door hole in the platform, while Steele, lantern in hand, stood there all alone, hard, stubborn and determined.

Then, in a sudden fit of rage, he swung the lantern against one of the uprights, smashing it into a shapeless mass of twisted metal and broken glass. He flung it far away into the darkness and groped his way down the rough steps.

Ann was sitting in their living room, a Bible on her lap, as Flint came in. He closed the door and stood there a while, looking at her. There was no sign of supper. He looked toward the kitchen stove and back at her.

"Where's my supper?" he asked harshly.

"Supper?" Ann seemed surprised and looked at the clock. "You didn't come home, so I thought you'd eat at the restaurant—if you were able to eat."

"Able to eat?" Flint came a little closer. "Are you going to cook me some supper?"

"No!" Ann was very firm in her reply, and Flint looked at her curiously. She had never taken that attitude before.

"Well!" Flint rocked on his heels. "So you're not going to cook me any supper, eh?"

"I am not."

Flint looked at her, his jaw tight, hands clenched. She was looking at him, her face white in the lamplight, but she did not waver. He was the first to relax. His face was badly marred from the fight with Johnny Riley. He rubbed a hugh palm across his face, just a little indefinite what to do or say next. Then he turned back to the door, but stopped and faced her again.

"All right," he said quietly; "I'll get supper. But listen to me and stop readin' that trash!"

Ann looked up from the Bible.

"Maybe you know this and maybe you don't," he said. "Dave Sells robbed the bank in Painted Rock today, killed the cashier and headed this way. That probably don't interest you. I'm alone in the office tonight. Now git this straight! At four o'clock in the mornin', you come to the office with a pot of black coffee—and don't be late."

"A pot of black coffee," repeated Ann wearily. "At four."

"And you better not forget it," he added and walked out.

For a long time Ann sat there, staring into space, thinking.

"A pot of black coffee at four o'clock in the morning," she repeated in a whisper. She looked at the clock. It was almost midnight. A few feet away, and to the right of the clock, was an old sampler, on which was designed in petty-point; queer old English letters, rather difficult to read, but it said, *God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.*

It had hung in Ann's room at home ever since she was a tiny girl, and she brought it with her to Agua Frio. She read it aloud to herself, a ghost of a smile in her gray eyes.

"That's right," she whispered. "I really never realized what it meant before."

THE LONG-OVERDUE stage from Painted Rock was unloading at the stage depot when Flint Steele came up from his house. Old Doc Grimes, tired and dusty, leaned against a porch-post and complained about the world in general, but a wheel in particular.

"Dad-blamed tire ran off," he explained. "No water-hole to soak it back; so I had to set for hours, wrappin' it with bailin'-wire. Lucky to git back a-tall, Flint. Huh! Jist thought

about it! Dave Sells ain't got here yet, huh?"

"Is he comin' back?" asked Flint quietly.

"Don't ask me. He was shore as hell aheadin' thisaway when he hightailed it out of Painted Rock. That feller's got nerve enough to go anywhere. Packin' ten thousand dollars of the bank's money, too."

A number of footsteps were very audible on the wooden sidewalk, and they turned to see a queer trio come into the lights of the depot. They were not arm-in-arm, but separated enough to allow each to interfere with the others. Judge Woods, Baker, the prosecutor, and Slim McFall. They halted in a group, looked at the lighted windows, looking owl-eyed at Flint Steele and Doc Grimes, but without any sign of recognition. Then, as if by mutual consent, they staggered around in front of the stage horses and went across the street to the *Eureka Saloon,* each one choosing his own course.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle!" exclaimed Doc Grimes.

But Steele had no comment—he was going down toward his office. Grimes shook his head sadly and started back to work.

Flint Steele locked the door of his office and pulled down the blind over the one front window. Then he placed a sawed-off shotgun, both hammers at full cock, across his desk, and sat down. There was no doubt in his mind that Dave Sells would come to find him. There was a mutual hate between them. Flint hated Sells because Sells was a crook—a killer; and Sells hated Flint Steele, because Flint had mistreated him in jail. At the end of the trial Sells had openly accused Flint Steele of being yellow, and swore he'd come back and kill him. Convicted men have sworn such things before, but forgot it later. Dave Sells was not the kind to forget.

It was exactly four o'clock in the morning, when Ann knocked quietly on the door of the office. Flint called, asking who it was, quickly locked the door behind her, and took the pot of coffee and the cup from her hands and went back to his desk. He filled the tin cup to the brim and drank it down, before paying any attention to his wife, who was still standing near the door. He looked at the clock, as he filled the cup again. He swallowed about half of it and turned to glower at her.

"What the hell are you standin' there for?" he asked harshly. "Go home where you belong!"

He downed the rest of the coffee and shoved the pot aside. Ann was still there, but he couldn't see her very well now. She seemed to be fading out in sort of a wavy way. He put his hand over his eyes for a moment, but it didn't help any. Then he started to get up, but his muscles refused to act, and a great drumming started in his ears. He fought against it for a few moments, but finally sprawled across his desk, one arm dangling over the side.

Ann moved slowly toward the desk, her face white in the yellow lamplight; still a little fearful of the big man, sprawling unconscious on the desk. With a trembling hand she pulled out a desk drawer and secured the keys clutching them tightly, as she ran to the short corridor which led to the cells. Moonlight slanted through the barred window, and she could see the white of Harry's face, as he came in against the bars. Panting audibly she unlocked the door and flung it open.

"Ann!" blurted Harry. "My God—why, what—"

"Don't talk!" she panted. "We've got to work fast."

Harry came out and his hands grasped her shoulders. He was too puzzled for words. Ann said, "I stole a horse and buggy from the liverystable a while ago. It's down at the house and —Harry, don't you understand?"

"No," he whispered, "I don't understand, Ann. Where is my father?"

"He's asleep at his desk—drugged. I drugged him with black coffee. Harry, I had to do something. Flint took the stuff off a prisoner and left it at the house. He said it would make you sleep for a week. Hurry—don't just stand there!"

"Ann, we can't get away with this." he said huskily. "My God, I appreciate it, but—all right, let's try it."

They stopped at the desk and looked at Flint Steele. There was not a sound on the street, as they closed the door. They went down the alley and past the completed scaffold, keeping off the main street. Harry said quietly, "I'll probably wake up pretty soon—but it's been a swell dream, Ann."

DAYLIGHT found Dave Sells down along the road to Agua Frio. He had seen nothing of the posse since he eluded them after the killing of his horse, but he was taking no chances. Mesquite grew thickly along that part of the road, and Sells crouched in there, hungry, thirsty and as dangerous as a tiger. No matter what happened, he was not going back to prison. All he wanted out of life now was a chance to kill Flint Steele—the rest could wait.

Then he heard the far-off rattle of buggy wheels. Someone was on the road early. Peace officers and a posse rarely used wheeled vehicles. Dave Sells moved out closer to the road, his gun ready. If he could get a horse—

The vehicle moving fast loomed up against his screen of mesquite, and he stepped boldly out, almost in front of it. Harry Steele surged back on the lines.

For several moments not a word was said, until mutual recognition dawned. Sells moved in a little closer, staring at them, and suddenly broke into a laugh. "The sheriff's wife and son! Yuh know," he moved in closer, "the feller was right who said, 'You never know your luck.' "

"Dave Sells," said Harry grimly. "How are you, Dave?"

"We won't argue that," replied Sells. "I stuck up the bank at Painted Rock yesterday, but the posse shot my horse—and the money was tied to the saddle. But," he grinned triumphantly, "I'd rather have you two than all the money in the bank."

"We never harmed you," said Ann weakly.

"That's right, my dear. You didn't, but your husband did. Locked my hands and tried to kick all my ribs loose. Now I've got his wife and son—and I can hurt him worse than a bullet can."

He motioned to Harry with his gun-barrel. "Get out of that buggy."

Harry got out slowly, wondering what Sells' next move would be. Ann started to get out, too, but Sells snapped, "Stay in there!"

Harry turned and looked at Ann, and at that moment Sells fired. The heavy bullet, fired at just about six feet, spun Harry around and he went flat on his face just off the road. Ann was leaning weakly over the side of the buggy, staring at Harry.

"Why did you shoot him?" she asked weakly.

"Three's a crowd," he said. "Get over on your side, sister."

Ann moved as far as possible from him, as he picked up the lines.

"I know an old road out here," he said, "and at the end of the road is an old shack, deep in the brush. We'll be safe there."

Sells looked around and back at Ann.

"Didn't bring any water, huh?" he remarked.

"We were going to Painted Rock."

"All right—a little thirst won't hurt us."

Sells drove on. In a dull, frightened way, Ann studied Dave Sells, as he

watched the road on all sides, driving slowly. He was a big man, gaunt, his prominent cheeks and deeply lined face gave him the profile of an Indian. He needed a shave and haircut, which he had probably been unable to get since his escape. He turned and looked at her curiously, as he suddenly thought of something.

"Wait a minute!" he said quietly. "I heard that Flint Steele was goin' to have to hang his son for the murder of Ben Claridge. How come I find you two, headin' for Painted Rock?"

"That wouldn't interest you," replied Ann firmly.

"That's right—nothin' interests me, except gettin' even with Flint Steele."

Into Ann's tortured mind flashed another fact of the trial. "You swore you'd kill Ben Claridge, too," she said.

Sells grinned at her. "Did I? Yeah, I remember I did. Yuh see, he testified against me—and I didn't like it. I'm glad he's dead. Here's the old road."

Sells turned the horse off on the old road and they went on through the mesquite.

IT WAS TOO early for much activity on the main street on Agua Frio. The sliding doors of the livery stable opened and Len Marsh, the stableman came out. He looked all around, yanked his hat down tightly and ran across the street to the sheriff's office. Johnny Riley had just tied his horse at the *Eureka* hitch-rack, and saw Len running across the street. It was unusual to see Len use that much energy.

He knocked heavily on the sheriff's door, but there was no response. After a moment of indecision he started on a dog-trot up the sidewalk, where Johnny Riley intercepted him.

"What's your hurry, Len?" asked Johnny.

"Somebody stole a horse and buggy from my stable!" blurted Len. "I've got to find the sheriff—he ain't at the office."

Without further ado, Len started on his dog-trot again, heading for the sheriff's office. Johnny scratched his nose thoughtfully and walked down to the alley, where he could see the scaffold, but no one was there. He finally went back to the street and around to the office. The shade was drawn on the front window. Johnny didn't try the door. Len was coming back down the sidewalk, still at that slow dog-trot, breathing hard from the effort.

"He ain't home!" panted Len. "Ain't nobody there. Door wasn't locked—so I looked."

Johnny drew a deep breath. Neither Ann nor Flint at home—house unlocked—and Dave Sells was heading for Agua Frio.

"Horse and buggy was there last night," said Len.

"You sleep in the stable, don't you?"

"Went to see my girl, over in Cobalt Canyon," confessed Len. "Got back late. Must have swiped it while I was away."

They went to the sheriff's office, and Johnny tried the unlocked door. Flint Steele was still at his desk, apparently recovering from the drug, but still hazy and uncertain. He stared at Johnny and Len, a queer, puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Somebody stole a horse and buggy from the stable last night," declared Len. "You've got to do somethin' about it, Sheriff."

Flint rubbed the palm of his hand across his forehead and eyes, staring into space, trying to puzzle out what Len had said. The cell keys were on the desk-top beside the shotgun, the lamp burned out, the room stinking of burned kerosene.

Flint got slowly to his feet. He seemed undecided just what to do next, bracing one hand on the desktop. He looked at the old clock on the wall, and

it showed just a few minutes past six o'clock. The blackened coffee-pot and the tin cup drew his attention.

"Ann," he said huskily, "Ann brought me coffee."

"If yuh ask me," said Len quietly, "he's been pretty damn drunk."

"Ann brought me coffee," repeated Flint, ignoring Len's remark. "I don't remember nothin' after that."

Suddenly he lurched away from the desk, heading for the short corridor to the cells. Johnny and Len followed him. The cell door was wide open and empty. Flint grasped the bars and peered into the small cell, turned and looked at Johnny.

"Gone!" he whispered. "Harry's gone!"

"That horse and buggy—" began Len.

"The coffee!" whispered Flint. "That woman! I'll—"

Flint didn't finish his threat, but whirled and headed out of the office, still unsteady on his feet, but determined.

"Harry broke jail and stole my horse and buggy!" blurted Len. "Funny thing—all that damned hammerin' for nothin'. I—I hope he gits away, Johnny—even if I never git the horse and buggy back."

LEN STOOD in the office doorway and watched Johnny Riley run across the street and get on his horse in front of the *Eureka*. Johnny spurred away from the rack and rode straight down to the sheriff's house. The front door was wide open, but Johnny dismounted at the front and walked swiftly around to the sheriff's little stable, where Flint was starting to saddle his horse. He was hatless, coatless, blazing with rage now. He whirled on Johnny.

"Ann drugged me!" he panted. "Then she turned Harry loose and they stole a horse and buggy." Flint's jaw fairly snapped. "I'll get 'em—git 'em both. I'll show both of them!"

Flint whirled and yanked the cinch tightly.

"But you don't even know which way they went," protested Johnny.

"Don't I? Harry owns a shack in Dancin' Devil Hills. They'd go there—sure as hell. I'll get 'em both."

"You're crazy, Flint," declared Johnny. "It'll be a hundred and twenty in the shade in Dancin' Devil—and no shade. Use your brains—if you've got any left."

Flint Steele whirled, a gun in his right hand, covering Johnny. "Don't try to stop me, you meddlin' fool! I'd sooner shoot you than not, Riley. Mind your own damn business!"

Flint swung into his saddle, grasped the horn for a moment to keep his balance, and spurred away around the house. Johnny shook his head sadly and drew a deep breath of relief.

"No hat, no water—and no brains. Heading for Dancing Devil— No! They wouldn't go there; they're heading for Painted Rock—and Ann hasn't any money."

Johnny ran around the house, made a fast mount and headed for Painted Rock.

Dave Sells made a mistake when he didn't make sure that Harry Steele was dead. The heavy bullet, instead of going deep, tore around his scalp, knocking him unconscious, and leaving a very painful wound. Harry was on his feet, staggering along the road, when Johnny Riley overtook him. With his face plastered with blood and dirt it was difficult for Johnny to recognize him at once. Johnny got off his horse and insisted that Harry sit down in the shade of the mesquite. Johnny wanted to know what happened. It was difficult for Harry to talk, mumbling things over and over.

Johnny shook him roughly. "What happened to Ann?" he asked.

"Dave Sells shot me," mumbled Harry. "Took Ann—I think."

"Why did Sells take Ann?" asked Johnny.

"I dunno," mumbled Harry weakly. "I—I heard him say that this would hurt Flint Steele worse than a bullet."

Johnny untied the canteen from his saddle and placed it beside Harry.

"Take this and keep out of sight," he ordered. "Maybe I'll see you again."

HARRY LOOKED blankly at Johnny, as he mounted his horse and rode on slowly, looking down at the road. He felt sure that Sells would not go to Painted Rock, but would turn off on one of the few side roads. This belief was confirmed in a few minutes, as he saw the buggy tracks where they turned off on the old road. Just what Sells had in mind, he did not know. The road turned to the south, and the Mexican Border was not over twenty miles away.

Of course, there was no road into Mexico, but that would be no problem for a man like Dave Sells. After Johnny had ridden away, Harry got to his feet, picked up the canteen and started staggering up the road.

Jim Worth and his weary posse were stretched out under some scrub oak trees on the slope of a hill, where they could overlook a large part of the desert. Jim Worth, his back against an oak bole, scanned the country with his old field-glasses while the rest of them, awake all night, took their ease. Heat waves danced across the desert, and it was like a blast from a furnace. Worth knew that Dave Sells had no water, and he also knew that no man could live very long out there without water.

Johnny Riley rode slowly and cautiously along the old road. He knew that Dave Sells would not be an easy man to capture; that he would be more alert now than ever. The buggy and horse tracks were fresh on the old road. Johnny saw an old shack, almost concealed in the brush, but the horse and buggy tracks went on past it. The shack was very old and had not been occupied for years. The one front window had long since been smashed. The closed door still looked fairly secure. Johnny reined over in front of the shack and started to dismount, when the door was flung open and Dave Sells stood there, covering Johnny with his sixshooter. "Well!" grunted Sells. "If it isn't the deputy sheriff!"

"Hyah, Dave," said Johnny calmly.

"Lookin' for me, huh? Fooled yuh, didn't I? Drove past and cut back. Smart, huh?"

"Seems like it," admitted Johnny.

"All right—unbuckle that belt and gun, Riley. Toss it over to me."

Johnny unbuckled his belt, wrapped it carefully around his holstered gun, and with a swift motion threw it far into the brush.

"If you want it—go get it," said Johnny firmly.

Sells shook his head. "It's safe enough," he said. "I may get it later. Get into the house."

Johnny walked inside, with Sells' gun against his spine. It was a small shack, with an old built-in bunk, one wooden box, but no other furniture. Ann was standing at the foot of the bunk, her hands tied behind her and fastened to the bunk-post. She was unhurt.

"Are you all right, Ann?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm all right, Johnny," she replied bravely.

"I'm all right, too," laughed Sells, "but nobody seems to give a damn about me."

Sells made Johnny lie down on the floor, where he roped him, hand and foot. Johnny hunched back and rested his shoulders against the wall. Ann said, "Johnny, I'm sorry you had to get into this trouble."

"Seems to me it was awful easy to get into, Ann," he smiled.

SELLS WENT over and peered through the broken window, before coming back to Johnny. "I hate to kill *you,* Riley," he said quietly. "You treated me all right in jail—but business is business."

"What's on your mind—except fear, Sells?"

"A lot of things. You two—and that posse from Painted Rock. Maybe they went home—maybe not."

"He shot and killed Harry—down on the road," said Ann.

Johnny had no comments about that. He looked up. "What's your next move, Sells?"

"That part is simple," replied Sells. "It ain't over twenty miles to the Border—and I've got friends down there. Come dark, I set fire to this shack, pile me and Ann on the horse and head south."

"But Ann never hurt you."

"I came back here to get even with Steele. I've got his wife and I shot his kid. Where's Flint Steele now?"

"You do the guessing," replied Johnny coldly. "He knows you headed toward Agua Frio from Painted Rock —so do your own guessing. It don't take brains to follow buggy tracks on an old road."

Sells went back and peered through the window again. He was not too satisfied with what Johnny had said. He stopped and looked down at Johnny, a grin on his face.

"This is a good laugh, Riley. I heard that Flint Steele was goin' to hang his own kid for the murder of Ben Claridge."

"What's funny about that?" asked Johnny curiously.

"Didn't I say I'd kill Flint Steele and Ben Claridge?" snarled Sells. "I said I'd break out and get both of 'em. Well, I came back to Agua Frio, like I said I would. I killed Claridge—but it caused some commotion and I had to get out of town, before I had a chance to get Steele."

"You mean—Harry didn't shoot him?" asked Ann hoarsely.

"I said I'd kill him—and I killed him. But what difference now? Harry's buzzard bait down there. Any remarks, Riley?"

"Only that Flint Steele is still alive, and that posse is probably still out here in the desert, Dave."

Sells went back to the window, looking out. There was little he could see out there. He finally hunkered down against the wall and rolled a cigaret.

HARRY STEELE'S shack in the Dancing Devils was little more than a glorified Navajo hogan. Unbroken sand was piled high against the door, when Flint Steele rode his tired horse up to the front. Even his burned eyes were able to see that no one had occupied that shack for months. Steele sat there hunched in his saddle for a long time, realizing that he had made a dangerous mistake. Then he turned his horse around and started away. Heat and thirst had taken its toll from both horse and rider. The animal stumbled in the deep sand, and its rider swayed in the saddle.

After another mile the animal stopped. Steele knew that this was the end of the ride. He got off heavily, managed to take off the saddle and bridle, and went away on foot, leaving the horse to shift for itself. Flint had no idea where he was headed; he just kept walking. After a while he unbuckled his heavy cartridge belt, and tossed it away, shoving the sixshooter inside the waist-band of his overalls; but that galled him and he threw the gun away.

In the meantime, Harry had gained a measure of strength, and with the aid of canteen water, he was following the buggy tracks on the old road. Just why, he had no idea. Unarmed and in

his present condition, there was little he could do.

He came in sight of the old shack, and he could see Johnny's horse against the brush just beyond the shack. He moved aside into the brush and circled the shack, where he found the horse and buggy. He knew now that Sells, Ann and Johnny were in the shack—and that Johnny was very likely a prisoner, too. He managed to catch the reins on Johnny's horse and lead the animal further back in the brush. The horse and buggy presented a problem, until he had a bright idea. He unharnessed the horse and turned it loose. The livery horse, tired of being left in the heat, broke into a gallop and went back past the shack, heading for Agua Frio.

The hoofbeats were plainly audible in the shack. Sells dashed to the window, where he had a distant, rear view of the buggy horse. He ran to the door, started to open it but stopped. His voice was complaining as he said, "Somebody turned that buggy horse loose."

He stood there nervously cocking and uncocking his gun, undecided what to do next. Someone out there—someone who had turned the horse loose. He came back with the cocked gun in his hand.

"Why don't you cut Ann loose so she can sit down?" asked Johnny. "She's ready to collapse in this heat."

Sells walked over, severed the ropes, and Ann went to her knees. Sells walked away, not offering to help her, but she crawled over to Johnny and sat against the wall.

Her whispered thanks to Johnny caused Sells to whirl on them.

"Stop that whisperin'!" he snapped.

"Losin' your nerve, eh, Sells?" queried Johnny. "Short on shells and short of nerve. Why don't you go out and find out who turned the horse loose? You haven't the nerve to go out there."

"Six shells are all I need for this job," snarled the lean outlaw.

Ann sniffed audibly and Johnny looked at her curiously. She had lifted her head and was trying to look at the window.

"Wood smoke, Johnny!" she whispered.

A swirl of it came through the cracks at the rear of the shack near Johnny and Ann. Dave Sells saw it, too.

"Fire!" he blurted. "Somebody set the brush on fire!"

Sells was brave enough now. He whirled, ran to the door and leaped outside. In a few moments they heard four shots, fired in quick succession. Their suspense didn't last long. They heard the commotion outside, the raging voice of Dave Sells, and he came in, shoving Harry ahead of him. Harry had been shot in the right arm; he stumbled drunkenly, as Sells gave him a push and almost fell into Johnny.

"The dirty rat set the brush on fire!" rasped Sells. "Wind's the other way, or we'd all be roasted."

Johnny looked at Ann, staring at Harry, blinking in amazement that Harry was still alive. Harry said, "Smoke signal; Injun stuff."

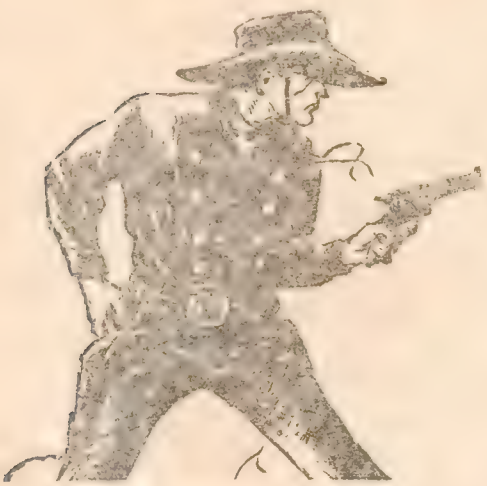
"I ought to blow your damn brains out," gritted Sells.

"Only two shells left," reminded Johnny calmly.

"Two's enough," retorted Sells angrily.

BACK ON the slope of the hill in the shade of the scrub-oaks, Jim Worth suddenly sat up straight and adjusted his glasses. Far down across the blistering desert was a column of smoke, piling up into the clear air. After a study of the spot, Worth got to his feet and called to his men: "A smoke down there in the flat country, boys! Might mean somethin'. Let's ride."

Flint Steele saw the smoke, too, but it meant very little to him. It wasn't very far away. He looked at it vacantly through heat hazed eyes, and kept on going ahead; walking mechanically —just going ahead.



In the shack, hazy with smoke, Dave Sells pawed it away from his face and cursed Harry for using a match on the dry brush.

"Why don't you get smart, Sells?" asked Johnny.

"Smart?" queried Sells. "Smart about what?"

"Pull out of here while you've got time. You know blamed well that men are watching the desert—and that smoke will bring 'em here mighty fast. Suppose the posse come—what chance have you got with only two shells left in your gun."

Sells laughed at Johnny, but without any mirth. "This is my party, Riley—and I don't scare easy."

Sells turned and walked over to the window. Some smoke was still twisting in as Sells half-crouched, his gun coming up to the sill. Then he hunched a little more and fired one shot. He lowered the gun, backed away from the window and ran to the door.

"The fool ain't even got a gun!" he rasped.

He came back out of the smoke haze, half-carrying, half-shoving Flint Steele ahead of him. The sheriff had been hit by that one bullet, but he was far from dead. Sells gave him a shove; he hit the wall near Harry, and collapsed on the floor. While the others stared in amazement at Steele, Sells hunkered down, peering into the face of the sheriff from Agua Frio.

"Know who I am, Sheriff?" asked Sells.

It was difficult for Flint to speak, but he managed to mutter, "I ought to —you—mangy—coyote."

Sells cocked his gun, his jaw tight. Johnny said, "That's your last shell, Dave."

"One's all I need, Riley. Your horse is still out there. I'll set fire to this shack and head for Mexico."

Sells leaned closer to Flint as he said; "Do you know what I'm sayin', Flint Steele?"

"You're beggin' for a rope around your mangy neck, Sells. I'll see that you get it, too."

"Just like you put one around your son's neck. You crazy fool, *I* killed Ben Claridge! Do you know what I'm sayin'? I came back and killed him—just like I swore I would. Now, I'm goin' to kill you."

"You—you killed Ben Claridge?" husked Flint. "You!"

"Me! I'd have killed you, too, but I had to get out—fast. I knew I'd get you sooner or later."

"You killed Ben Claridge," muttered Flint Steele. "You done it—not Harry."

Dave Sells leaned back a little, looking them all over. Finally he chuckled a little and leaned closer, looking into the burned eyes of Flint Steele.

"You've tried to make folks think you're a hard man, Steele, a man with guts. I think you're as yellow as saf-

fron. Now I'm goin' to find out how much nerve you've got."

"What do you mean?" asked Flint painfully.

"Want to gamble for your life, you yellow pup?"

"Gamble for my life?"

"I've got one shell left, Steele—just one. This one bullet is for you or your kid there. Want to gamble?"

Flint Steele seemed to grasp at the offer. "What's the deal, Sells?"

"Have you got a silver coin in your pocket?"

It was only after a supreme effort that Flint was able to produce the desired coin. Sells looked at it closely, satisfied. "A nice shiny silver dollar, huh? All right, Steele; you do the flipping. You can call it, too; I want to be fair."

Sells laughed heartily at his own joke. Flint squinted through painful eyes at the outlaw. "I can call it, eh?" he said slowly. "I'll take heads."

"All right," said Sells. "If it comes heads, you live; if it comes tails, you get the last bullet. Satisfied? Flip it."

Johnny pulled up his knees to give Steele room. Every eye was on Flint Steele's big hand, as he managed to balance the dollar on his thumb. Death for one, possible life for the other. Flint snapped his thumb, and the dollar sparkled for a moment in the air, before it thudded on the dirt floor of the shack. Sells leaned over it, lifted his head and looked at Flint.

"Heads!" he blurted. "You get it, Kid!"

THE HEAVY sixshooter came up, and the shot blasted loudly in the small room; but Flint Steele, at the last moment seemed to fling himself across Harry and took the bullet himself.

Forgetting caution, Sells surged in against Johnny, as he tried to yank Flint away from Harry. In a flash Johnny had lifted his two booted feet, and they caught Sells about waist-high. Braced against the wall, Johnny had the strength and leverage to lift Sells off his feet and send him crashing against the opposite wall. Sells slumped to the floor, knocked out when his head hit the wall. And almost at that moment there were a lot of galloping hoofs outside, a babel of voices, and Jim Worth, backed by his posse, crashed in the door. Jim Worth didn't ask questions. He yelled to his men, "Get them folks out of here—fast! The wind has shifted and this shack won't last ten minutes!"

There were not enough horses, so several of the posse doubled-up. They put Flint Steele in the buggy, and pulled it with a saddle-horse. Ann and Johnny were on one horse at the rear of the cavalcade, with Ann in the saddle. Behind them, the old shack had already burned to the ground. Ann said wearily, "It was a terrible nightmare, Johnny. A lot of my life has been a terrible nightmare. I hated Flint Steele more than I believed I could ever hate anyone. When he was willing to match his life against the life of his own son, I knew he would, Johnny."

Johnny had no opinions, it seemed. After a while Ann said, "Johnny, did Flint faint and fall over—or did he do it on purpose to save Harry?"

"Why do you ask me that?"

"I'd like to know that Flint did one good thing in his life, Johnny. He's dead now—and I'd like to feel that he did one good thing—for me to remember him by."

Johnny quietly drew a silver dollar from a pocket of his sagging vest, glanced down at it without extra movement. It was a special gambler's dollar—with a head imprinted on both sides. With a flip of his wrist, Johnny sent it spinning into the mesquite and sand.

"We'll have to give him the credit, Ann," he said quietly.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Davy Crockett's Own Story

A DATE WITH DESTINY

by HAROLD GLUCK

SENOR FRANCISCO RUIZ, alcalde of San Antonio de Bexar, has arranged for this safe conduct pass to the Alamo. When three shots are fired from the Mexican lines, that is the signal that we must leave; otherwise we will be trapped in here with the gallant men who have come to fight for Texas.

There is a possibility that General Santa Ana might void the entire agreement and that you and I will have no choice but to remain here. Well, that is the chance a western correspondent must take in these critical growing days. But the interview is well worth the risk.

For the man we are to interview has become a legend in his own lifetime, and his deeds will last forever.

His hair is brown. His eyes I would say are either blue or gray. He is over six feet tall and perhaps tips the scales at 180 pounds. He is a westerner in every inch of bone and muscle; and here in the Alamo, you see the men with whom he mixes. They are hunters, trappers, and small clearing farmers.

Notice that muzzle loader that Davy Crockett is fondling. Firing its patched bullet, it can be a destructive weapon. Most of the men seem to have flintlocks. Do my eyes deceive me? I think I see two percussion rifles over there.

Some of the men here have a pistol or two stuck in their belt. And that wicked looking knife is a creation of Bowie. Frankly there is an odor that comes from the bodies of these men. You get the whiff of bear blood and woodsmoke from Davy Crockett, for what he can do to a bear may yet depopulate the animal kingdom. When he was but nine years old, he already was a capable hunter.

People believe almost anything about Davy Crockett and especially when it comes to his hunting ability. They say that one raccoon, when he found Crockett's sights being aimed at him came to a sensible conclusion. "Don't shoot, Davy! I'll come down!" Now they say he doesn't even have to raise his rifle; he just grins, and the raccoons quit right then and there.

I see that Davy is ready to give us something about his life. Time is precious and I hope he tells us the best stories. Go ahead, Davy, and don't mind me as I take those words of yours down in shorthand.

"MY FATHER'S name was John Crockett," begins Davy as he removes some bullets from his pouch, "and he was of Irish descent. He was either born in Ireland or on a passage from that country to America across the Atlantic. He was by profession a farmer and spent the early part of his life in the state of Pennsylvania. The name of my mother was Rebecca Hawkins. She was an American woman, born in the State of Maryland. It is likely I may have heard where they were married, but, if so, I have forgotten. It is however certain that they were, or else you would never have taken the trouble to come here and interview me.

"My father and mother had six sons and three daughters. I was the fifth son. As my father was very poor and living as he did, far back in the backwoods, he had neither the means nor the opportunity to give me or any of the rest of his children any learning. According to the best information given to me, I was born on the 17th of August in the year 1786. Whether by day or night, I believe I never heard. But if I did, I have forgotten.

"Did you know that I was a farmer? My mother-in-law gave me two cows and calves. My wife could use a wheel and was also a good weaver. So we worked on for some years, renting ground and paying high rent. I couldn't make a fortune at all. So I concluded to quit it and cut out for some new country. At that time I had two sons. So we moved on. The Duck and Elk river country was just beginning to settle and I determined to try that.

"I had now one old horse and a couple of two year old colts. So we all fixed up and I packed my two colts with as many of my things as they could bear. And away we went across the mountains. We got on well enough and arrived safely in Lincoln county, on the head of the Mulberry fork of Elk river.

"I found this a very rich country and so new that game of different sorts was very plenty. It was here that I began to distinguish myself as a hunter and to lay the foundation for my future.

"Did you ever know that I once was a magistrate? That was when I was living at the head of Shoal Creek. Many bad characters began to flock upon us. So we found it necessary to set up a sort of temporary government of our own.

"I was appointed one of the magistrates. When a man owed a debt and wouldn't pay it, I and my constable ordered our want. Then he would take the man and bring him before me for trial. I would give judgment against him and then an order for an execution would easily scare the debt out of him. If any one was charged with marking his neighbor's hogs or with stealing anything, if there were tolerable

grounds for the charge, I would have him well whipp'd.

"We kept this up till the legislature added us to the white settlements in Giles county. I was then made a squire according to the law. My judgements were never appealed from. Yet I never read a page in a law book in all my life.

"YOU HAVE heard much about my shooting ability. Now there was the time the good citizens of Little Rock wanted to give me a dinner. That's what happens when you start to get famous. So I went to Little Rock and met the landlord where I was going to eat. As there was considerable time to be killed, or got rid of in some way before dinner could be cooked, the good citizens proposed that we should go beyond the village and shoot at a mark. For they had heard I was a first rate shot and they wanted to see for themselves whether fame had not blown her trumpet a little too strong in my favor.

"So I shouldered my rifle which I called 'Betsey' and followed by all the leading men in Little Rock, we went beyond the village. I was in prime order. My eye was as keen as a lizard and my nerves were as steady and unshaken as the political course of Henry Clay. So at it we went, the distance one hundred years. The principal marksmen, and such as had never been beat, led the way, and there was some pretty fair shooting, I tell you. At length it came to my turn. I squared myself, raised my beautiful Betsey to my shoulder and took deliberate aim. And smack, I sent the bullet right into the center of the bull's eye. 'There's no mistake in Betsey,' said I, in a sort of careless way as they were all looking at the target, sort of amazed and not at all overpleased.

" 'That's a chance shot, Colonel', said one who had the reputation of being the best marksman in those parts.

" 'I can do it five times out of six any day in the week,' I replied.

"They now proposed that we should have a second trial. But knowing that I had nothing to gain and everything to lose, I was for backing out and fighting shy. But there was no let off. So at it again we went. They were now put upon their mettle and they fired much better than the first time. And it was what might be called pretty sharp shooting.

"When it came to my turn, I squared myself and turning to the prime shot, I gave him a knowing look. Just by way of showing my confidence. And says I, 'Look out for the bull's eyes, stranger.'

"I blazed away, and I wish I may be shot if I didn't miss the target. They examined it all over, and could find neither hair nor hide of my bullet and pronounced it a dead miss. Then says I, 'Stand aside and let me look, and I warrant you I get on the right trail of the critter.' They stood aside and I examined the bull's eye pretty particular, and at length cried out, 'Here it is! There is no snakes if it ha'nt followed the very track of the other.'

"They said it was utterly impossible, but I insisted on their searching the hole and I agreed to be stuck up as a mark myself if they did not find two bullets there. They searched for my satisfaction, and sure enough it all come out just as I had told them. For I had picked up a bullet that had been fired and stuck it deep into the hole without any one perceiving it. They were all perfectly satisfied that fame had not made too great a flourish of trumpets when speaking of me as a marksman. And they all said they had enough of shooting for that day and they moved we adjourn to the tavern and liquor.

"YOU WANT to hear something about my bear hunting experiences? Well, on that particular morning I left my son at the camp and we start-

ed towards the harricane. And when we had went about a mile, we stared a very large bear but we got along mighty slow on account of the cracks in the earth occasioned by the earthquake. We however made out to keep in hearing of the dogs for about three miles and then we come to the harricane. Here we had to quit our horses. By this time several of my dogs had got tired and come back. But we went ahead on foot for some little time in the harricane when we met a bear coming straight to us. And not more than twenty or thirty yards off. I started my tired dogs after him and McDaniel pursued them. I went on to where my other dogs were. I had seen the track of the bear they were after and I knowed he was a screamer. I followed on to about the middle of the harricane but all my dogs pursued him so close that they made him climb an old stump about twenty feet high.

"I got in shooting distance of him and fired but I was all over in such a flutter from fatigue and ranning that I couldn't hold steady. But, however, I broke his shoulder and he fell. I run up and loaded my gun as quick as possible and shot him again and killed him. When I went to take out my knife to butcher him, I found I had lost it in coming through the harricane. The vines and briars were so thick that I would sometimes have to get down and crawl like a varment to get through it all. A vine I supposed had pulled it out. While I was standing and studying what to do, my friend came to me. He had found my knife which was mighty good news to me.

"One night while hunting bears it was very cold. Everything I had on me was wet and frozen. I couldn't find anything that would burn well and so I concluded I should freeze, if I didn't warm myself in some way by exercise. So I got up and hollered awhile and then I would just jump up and down with all my might, and throw myself into all sorts of motions. But all this wouldn't do. For my blood was now getting cold and the chills coming all over me. I was so tired, too, that I could hardly walk. But I thought I would do the best I could to save my life and then if I died, nobody would be to blame. So I went to a tree about two feet through and not a limb on it for thirty feet. I would climb up to the limbs and then lock my arms together around it. And then slide down to the bottom again. This would make the insides of my legs and arms feel mighty warm and good. I continued this till daylight in the morning. And how often I clumb up my tree and slid down I don't know, but I reckon at least a hundred times.

"In about one month I killed forty-seven more bears which made one hundred and five bears which I killed in less than one year. And now time is getting short. Here you are in the fortress of the Alamo. Sure, I came here to help these people fight. Let me make this clear to you and the world. The Mexican government, by its colonization laws, invited and induced the Anglo-American population of Texas to colonize its wilderness. This was under the pledged faith of a written constitution that they should continue to enjoy that constitutional liberty and republican government to which they had been habituated in the land of their birth, the United States of America.

"The government of Santa Ana now offers the settlers the cruel alternative to either abandon their homes acquired by many privations or submit to intolerable tyranny. So we fight and I fight with them."

I HEAR THE signal shots being fired. That means our time is up. So farewell to you, Davy Crockett. So long as men have the courage to fight, regardless of the odds, then liberty and freedom will continue. So long as the spirit of the West lives, there will run through our veins the heritage of courage.

★

Why should his neighbor accuse Griff Larsen of stealing the horses he had purchased just a few days before?

NOT FOR WAGES

by EZRA C. PLANCK

GRIFF LARSEN frowned as he glanced out the window of the shack-like postoffice and general store. There was Spike Dunham pacing up and down the dusty street; the man seemed to be tailing him, and Griff had a feeling that he'd been doing it a big part of the day.

Well, if Spike was looking for trouble he'd be accomodated, Griff promised himself grimly.

But what was behind it all? Spike worked on the Deering place—so what? Griff had bought seven head of cattle there the other day; and of course he'd danced with Jane Deering at the Town Hall a few times and all that. She even seemed to like him a little, though she clung to formality and called him "Mr. Larsen." Roy Blake, the foreman, was usually present. Surely all that could have nothing to do with Spike's following him around like a shadow—or could it? This was enough to rasp a fellow's nerves; it called for a showdown, right now.

Brushing off the grizzled old storekeeper's efforts to strike up a conversation, Griff barged out, banging the decrepit screen door. Spike was at the curb a few paces away, facing him. A tall, gangling cowman with an unsavory reputation—though not particularly noted for personal courage—his hawklike face was contorted.

Griff came up slowly. "You looking for me, Dunham? Gunning for me, by any chance?"

Spike's body tensed but he didn't reach for his holster. "Who said I was aimin' to draw on you?"

Griff pushed his hat back and rested his hands on his belt. "I don't need to be told: I've got eyes. You and I better mosey over to Buck's for a little palaver; you can tell me what's eating you. Coming along friendly-like or have I got to take out my persuader?"

"I've got no business with you, Larsen; you can go over to Buck's by your lonesome."

Griff's level steel-grey eyes blazed. "You'll either go along with me or we'll shoot it out right here and now." His hand slid toward his sixgun.

Spike shrugged, signifying reluctant assent.

As they entered the saloon Griff

said, "I'll buy you a drink to make it look peaceful, and to see if you've been boasting you'd get me the first time I came to town. Maybe that'll loosen your tongue, because I've got some interesting questions to ask."

When the two walked to the bar together the men present stared in obvious surprise at the apparently amicable scene. Even the bartender seemed a bit undecided about serving them. So Griff's hunch had been correct; Spike *had* bragged that he'd get him. After they had downed their liquor, Griff motioned his companion toward an unoccupied table, keeping him in front. When Spike sat down, Griff, tossing his wide hat onto one of the chairs, seated himself, too.

"Keep your hands above the table," he said quietly; "if you don't, you're going to be minus a gun."

The ranch hand was watching his virtual captor with an unconcealed but rather impotent suspicion. "What do you want o' me, Larsen? I ain't done nothin', and don't think you kin bluff me into anything."

Griff smiled. "One belt of the stuff has sure bolstered you up. If I bought you any more you might forget to tell the truth."

"You're barking up the wrong tree." Spike said doggedly. "I ain't gunnin' for you, I tell you."

"You're a damn liar and you know it." Griff had unwittingly raised his voice. "I could tell by the looks on these fellows' faces when we came in together. You fancy yourself as a gunman—and you've been hired to do away with me. Who's behind you? Talk fast or you may wind up with a hole in your thick head."

SWEAT STREAMED down Spike Dunham's face. He could see that the other men were standing at the tables, poised to bolt flying lead; he seemed sick with fear and anger. "Damn you!" his voice exploded, "if you've got to know, it was—"

But he never finished; he looked up and suddenly paled. Griff turned and saw that a woman had entered the place. A young woman. Even at a distance he saw she was comely with a wealth of shining golden curls. She approached—Jane Deering: Fire smouldered in her usual laughing blue eyes. What the devil—

She strode up and loomed over the two men like an avenging goddess.

Griff rose with a slight smile. "Howdy, Miss Deering; I hardly expected to see you here."

Ignoring his implication, she shot back; "Made a new friend, have you? I'm surprised to see you two together after what I've heard."

Griff tried to keep his voice steady. "I guess you know the circumstances that brought us together."

She glared at him as if minded to strike him with her riding crop. Then she tossed the crop on the table and said sternly, "May I speak to you alone, Mr. Larsen?"

"Why sure; you can tell me as much as Spike could, and you're a lot easier to look at."

When the door closed on the cowhand, the girl turned on Griff. "What did you mean, I should know the circumstances?"

"You heard my last remark to your man Friday; why did you send him gunning for me?"

Jane Deering gasped. Her chest heaved as though the firm young breasts would burst her white shirtwaist. "That's not true! How can you accuse me of ordering you killed, even though you did steal seven of my cows?"

It was Griff's turn to gasp. He stared blankly at this lovely but astounding creature who faced him sardonically, hands on hips. He was her neighbor on the north, had been for the last year or so. He finally found his voice. "Did

you say *steal,* Miss Deering? I bought those cows of yours and paid cash for them."

"Bought them? Whom did you pay? I assume you have your receipt or bill of sale?"

Griff bit his lip. "Knowing that you don't handle those things yourself, I bought them off your foreman and paid him. I didn't demand any bill of sale or such— I took it for granted you people were honest."

She looked somewhat unconvinced. "That's odd. I've always found you a gentleman, but— The fact is both Spike and the foreman tell me they saw you simply driving the cattle away. It's two against one."

Seething inwardly, Griff picked up his hat. Jim Wilson, the old ranger who lived with him, had ridiculed him as a babe in the woods for not getting a bill of sale.

"Look here, young lady: there's something 'way off-color and I aim to find out about it. Meanwhile those cows are mine, regardless of what those two crooks of yours tell you."

She seemed to relent a bit. "Would you be willing to confront the so-called crooks?"

"I sure would! I'll be out to your ranch this afternoon; be sure to have Spike and the other good-for-nothing on hand."

He thought he detected a certain admiration in Jane's look, but she said nothing, and he added, "They'll probably repeat their lies and leave me still a cattle thief in your eyes."

Jane Deering flashed a haughty, withering look. "Got everything figured out, haven't you? Especially where I'm concerned."

"Well, Miss Deering," he said slowly—"and I don't suppose I ever *will* be able to call you Jane now—at least you've convinced me *you* didn't send that varmit Spike gunning for me. Maybe that was his own idea. As for the rest of it, we shall see, as the blind man said."

She started to make some reply; but he was already on his way out.

GRIFF'S MIND was in a turmoil as he went to the stable. Why was Roy Blake doing this to him? And the galling thing was that it was the Deering ranch he was accused of stealing from, to be blackened in her eyes. Jane, he admitted to himself, had come to mean a lot to him in the months he'd known her. A fellow could aspire, couldn't he? At least he could before this happened.

As he neared the rambling one-story Triple X ranch house, he noticed well-kept grounds with flowers and shrubs. Willows and cottonwoods flanked the wide driveway, down which a friendly old collie pattered to sniff at the brown mare's heels and eye the rider with amiable curiosity. At least the dog appeared to like him—that might be a good omen.

Jane, in feminine attire that pointed up her charms, met him at the door. "Glad you came, Mr. Larsen. Your friends," she smiled sarcastically—"are waiting for you."

Griff, silent, followed her through a large room with well-stocked bookshelves and two large portraits over the fireplace—her parents, probably—into a smaller room obviously used as an office. Blake and Spike paid him no heed as he entered. They sat taciturn, the cowpuncher scowling hawkishly, the young foreman sporting an urbane smile.

Jane cut the Gordian knot of antagonism by coming quickly to the point. "Remember you're all in my house; I want no gunplay or rough stuff. On your say-so, Roy, I have accused Mr. Larsen of stealing some cows he claims he bought of you. What is there to this?"

Blake turned scarlet. His hand moved toward his gun but halted at the

sharp look Jane flung at him. "Maybe it's best to let him keep the cows without any trouble," he said nervously. "I guess he's hard put to get started, though I don't like the way he did it. If he'd come to me like a man—"

Griff lunged at the foreman, but Spike and Jane intervened; and Griff realized he was leaving himself open for Blake to shoot him in apparent self-defense.

The foreman kept the table between himself and Griff, who spoke irately, "Miss Deering, this man is lying, just as I said. And he's a thief besides—he took my money and didn't turn it over to you."

Blake fairly exuded hatred, though Griff, watching him closely, noted he made no second attempt to draw his gun. "I'll get you for this when you can't hide behind a woman's skirts. No man can call me those pet names and live."

Jane gasped as Griff made another move toward Blake, then quickly checked herself. "We'll see who does the getting when the proper time comes. I hope Miss Deering realizes now what a rat she has for a foreman."

Hearing Jane's heavy breathing in the tense atmosphere, Griff reminded himself that the showdown must be deferred; it certainly could not come in her house, in her presence.

Blake said, with an assumption of nonchalance: "Sorry, Miss Jane, but I think I'll just have to kill this disturber when he's off this range."

The girl bridled. "Roy! Stop this talk of killing people! And let me remind you that I invited Mr. Larsen here. What's more, I'm inclined to believe most of his story; at any rate I intend to get the actual facts."

BLAKE STALKED from the room, Spike tagging along like a puppy. As they left, Jane faced Griff. "I trust you realize the deadly danger you're in, young man."

He smiled. "I'm used to danger—young lady."

"No doubt; but I feel largely to blame for all this. Those two are loyal to me, and they seem convinced you took the cows." She leaned against a table on which an open account book lay.

"Well, do *you* think I stole them?" Griff demanded.

"If I weren't pretty well convinced you didn't I wouldn't have asked you here," she told him simply.

"Like as not then you'll be willing to go on stepping Virginia reels with me at the Town Hall shindigs."

"Perhaps," she said. But she said it with a smile that indicated the 'perhaps' was no reluctant 'maybe'.

Blake refused to let well enough alone. "So you call Blake by his first name. What's he to you besides a foreman, may I ask?"

The girl's form stiffened. "You may *ask*—but it just isn't any of your business."

He shrugged and took another tack. "All right, but you've practically admitted he lied to you and stole your money. And yet you keep him. I must draw my own conclusions; I wouldn't like to have to kill your intended husband."

"He's not my intended husband, not that it concerns you. You're impertinent— I'm sorry I ever asked you here."

Griff bowed gravely and left. He rode back to his own small ranch, feeling the need of old Jim Wilson's sage counsel. The two had blown into this cattle country and bought the little place with their meagre capital. Jim, close to seventy, was the two-man outfit's cook and "guardian" of the poultry.

Things had been going rather well till this snarl came up. Griff, without being overt about it, had actually turned speculative eyes on his wealthy neighbor. And "wealthy" was the

word; Jane Deering had inherited her father's vast holding with its immense herds of fine stock. And while playing cards with some of her hands, Griff had mentioned his desire to buy a few head of Guernsey to build up his own herd. Arrangements for the purchase had been made—and all this trouble had come of it.

Jim was feeding the chickens as Griff reined up. "What's up kid?" the oldtimer asked, "You're looking a little peaked."

Griff dismounted wearily. "Well, I *have* had sort of a rough day— I'll tell you about it later."

As he washed up in the primitive kitchen he outlined the day's events for his partner, then asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Jim straightened his floursack apron. "I think you were a cussed young fool not to have demanded a bill o' sale. But"—his huge mustache wagged ominously—"it's easy to see they're out to get you for some reason that ain't clear jest yet. You'll have to watch out right sharp for the ornery skunks."

"That's just what Jane told me," Griff said innocently.

"Miss Deerin', you mean? So you call her Jane, eh?"

"You're pulling my leg, oldtimer; why should that girl be interested in a poor cuss like me? But when I get the fence up, I aim to scout around a bit and find out what that Deering outfit is up to."

IN THE MORNING, Griff tackled the construction of a portion of line fence between his land and the Triple X; he'd do what he could afford for now and let the rest ride till next year. He was bending over to pick up a post when a bullet whistled close to his head, and he heard a rifle's sharp crack. A tiny cloud of dust rose from the dry ground.

Darting frantically for cover, he felt a jolt at his shirtsleeve, then a prickly sensation; he'd been hit. His arm was bleeding, though it was plainly just a flesh wound. He waited behind a boulder a seeming eternity; but no more shots came.

Neglecting his nicked forearm, he returned warily to his fencing, and at once heard the approaching clomp-clomp of a horse's hooves. The rider proved to be—Jane Deering, no less. Good Lord, had she seen this affray?

Apparently she hadn't. Calmly she reined in her glossy horse and scrutinized his work. "Nice straight line, Griff; I like to see fence up."

Ah, she wasn't mad any more. And she'd finally called him "Griff".

Plunging into conversation, he almost forgot what had happened. He had been literally starving for a bit of feminine company—preferably Jane Deering's. Without reserve, he was telling her of his difficulties, including his inability to get the fence completed except over a long period. And with equal candor she was offering to pay for the materials and labor, with Griff to reimburse her for his share whenever he could.

"Naturally I want to keep my own stock from straying," she added.

His cattle, he told her, kept to the good pasture along the creek. "You should be able to keep yours within bounds with all the help you've got."

She looked irked. "You haven't answered my question about the fence," she pointed out.

"I'm thinking it over, Miss Deer— I mean Jane."

She began to dismount and Griff saw her foot snag in the stirrup. He ran to help her—and suddenly his heart went berserk. He could almost hear it pounding. He never could explain to himself why he did what he did next, but the impulse was overpowering. Jane, getting down off balance, fell against him. He gathered her crushingly into his arms and kissed her hungrily—once—twice—

She struggled, and he relaxed his grip; she wrenched herself free and slapped him.

Then he heard himself apologizing in sheepish confusion. And the angry look in her eyes evaporated when she spotted his blood-crusted arm. "What on earth happened to you?"

"Oh, nothing much. Somebody shot me, that's all—one of your loyal vassals, I assume."

She turned pale. "Merciful Lord! Why don't you sell out to me and leave here? It might be the means of saving your life." She stood tracing patterns in the sandy soil with the butt of her riding crop.

"No; not on your life! Those packrats you've got on your payroll can't make me run. Besides"—looking at her significantly—"I've got another reason for staying in these parts now."

She tossed her head. "You could be mistaken on that. And I advise you not to take advantage of me again."

Griff grimaced. "I shouldn't 'a done it, Jane; but I don't trust you with that foreman of yours."

He'd said the wrong thing again. "Why, you..." she sputtered.

She started for her horse, but suddenly he took her hand. "Wait just a minute, please. I said that backwards: I mean I can't trust Blake with you or your livestock."

"No? He was all right till you came around; perhaps you'd relish a foreman's wages yourself."

"When I'm your foreman, Jane, it won't be for wages. I won't be working for Miss Deering but for Mrs. Griffin Larsen."

She snaked her arm away. "Your nerve is refreshing, I'm sure. Good day to you." She whirled and hastened to her mount.

His gold-crowned neighbor left Griff wondering at his own daring, but wondering about her too. Her reactions to his double-barrelled forwardness hadn't been so drastic, when one considered. She'd lingered after being kissed against her will, and her parting shot was pointed—but not too caustic. His hopes began to rise.

THE DAY after completing the fence job, he set out to scout the Deering west line. This was a long way from the ranch buildings; it should be easy to avoid observation. He crossed the creek that traversed his acres and followed the rich pastureland it watered. He rode miles and saw no one.

At the far west end of the Deering ranch he came to a gap in the hills ideally adapted to shield the valley from outsiders. What lay beyond?

He rode slowly, keenly alert. Finally he spotted the Deering herd, and a breathtaking sight it was: hundreds, perhaps thousands, of white faces. What a cattle queen this girl was!

Wondering why he saw no riders, he sat on a fallen tree bole to eat his lunch. He speculated on what lay beyond that gap across the valley. Curious magpies flitted about, eyeing his sandwiches. A crane rose from the creek bed with a sharp cry. The sky was a rich blue dome.

By late afternoon he was home again. Not until he was between stockshed and house did he see Jim Wilson's prostrate form. He quickly drew his gun and approached the old man; nobody was in sight.

Jim was unconscious, with an ugly scalp wound. After carrying him into the house and dressing the wound as best he could, Griff made a hasty inspection outside.

He saw tracks of horses—and yes, cows—in the yard, and they led from the rear pasture. He galloped off for the creek.

There were more hoofprints in the wet sand; and when he got down he noted the imprint of a man's boot with a small horseshoe design in the heel. Griff was quite sure he'd seen Spike Dunham wearing unusual boots of this

type. A little way off, Griff's herd was grazing.

Not all of it though; the seven cows he'd bought from the Triple X were missing.

It was late evening and Griff was reading in the kitchen when he heard Jim's voice. "Holy American! Where am I?"

He rushed in to the cot. "Well, old sourdough, how do you feel?"

Jim was rubbing his head and trying to see himself in the cracked mirror by the dim light of a kerosene lamp. "Reckon I was plumb knocked out. got any coffee?"

Griff told him what had happened. "Did you get a look at any of them?"

Jim looked downcast. "Nope. They was runnin' the cows through the yard, stirrin' up dust like all git-out. One of 'em kinda looms up over me an' whangs me on the head—musta been with his gun-butt."

"I think I know who they were." Griff averred. "Only two, eh? Blake and Spike, I feel sure. Those polecats stick close together; must enjoy each other's smell."

When Griff brought the hot coffee, the old chap, raising himself on his elbow, said weakly: "Son, I'm tryin' to think this thing out and I guess I'm on the right track. Blake's holdin' somethin' over Miss Deerin's head; or else she's in love with him. Otherwise no gal in her right mind would keep on such a no-good galoot for her foreman."

Griff pondered. "That's not quite the way I figure, but you may be right. Anyway I'm going to find out more about this thing when I can leave you."

"Well, if you want that gal—and I think you do—you'd better look sharp and start makin' hay."

"Who said anything about that?—I'm just looking for my cows."

Jim grinned slyly and lay back.

NEXT DAY, Griff rode toward the Deering line again, rendered less cautious by his indignation: and it wasn't till he noticed the herd had moved further west that he began to guard against being seen.

Some movement and a rising cloud of dust indicated the cattle were stirring more than usual. He circled to get the willows of the creek between him and the cowhands and herd. Three or four men were cutting out some cattle and moving them toward the gap.

Once they were out of sight through the pass, he spurred his horse to follow. Possibly they had seen him, and might be waiting in ambush—but it was a chance he had to take.

The trail through the pass was worn, showing a surprising lot of use; Griff kept a keen lookout as he advanced. A small valley soon spread before him. A few rods ahead were a log cabin, two sheds and a large corral; and beside the corral the stock that had been herded through the gap was contentedly grazing. He counted twenty-six head, and his seven were among the lot.

Well, it was a time for chance-taking. He began to cut out his own cows. This wasn't difficult—but a young bull refused to be separated from the females. Griff started the eight head through the pass. Unbelievably, no one was following him. Perhaps the men he'd seen were getting drunk somewhere. Griff tried to drive the bull back, but it was no go. This, he reflected, might well place him in a bad light.

Several riders loomed suddenly over a small rise. Hell's bells! it was Sheriff Bob Nixon, flanked by Blake, Spike and two other Triple X men—and there was no time for a getaway! Griff waited as they rode up.

"You're under arrest, Larsen," the sheriff said, almost boredly; "hand over your shootin' iron."

Griff unfastened his gun. "Mind tell-

ing me who signed the warrant, Sheriff?"

"I don't need a warrant when I see you with stolen property. Miss Deering can prefer her charges later. Blake here says he's been suspecting you quite a while. You don't deny these critters belong to Miss Deering, do you?"

"I've nothing to say right now—except that this is a neat little trap Blake sprung on me. I doubt if Miss Deering knows anything about it."

He whirled on the grinning foreman. "Well, Blake, when I get out you and I will be settling our little account once and for all. Better be ready."

Blake laughed. "*When* you get out. That's gonna be quite some time—you're caught with the goods this trip."

BUT THE foreman proved a poor prophet. Next noon, Griff called from his cell to the sheriff: "What's the matter—don't you feed us degraded cattle rustlers at all?"

Nixon made a wry face. "No, we don't; leastways when we're gonna turn 'em loose in half a minute. Miss Deerin' ain't pressin' the charge after all. In fac' she seems right peeved 'cause I brought you in. Danged if I can figure out a woman!" Somewhat sheepishly he unlocked the cell and handed Griff his gun.

"Now for Pete's sake try'n stay out of trouble. Spike's in town, and I don't want any gunplay."

Griff had hardly reached the street when he spotted Spike emerging from the saloon. A few quick but stealthy strides and he was close behind the unsuspecting cowhand.

"Just act natural and don't turn around so that I won't have to plug you," Griff said.

Spike, sensing the menace in Griff's voice, obeyed instructions. "You got nothin' on me," he whined: "I only done what I was told."

"Well, it didn't seem to take much coaxing. Get going—get on your horse. I'll be right behind you, so no monkey business."

But when Spike saw they were headed for the Deering place his bravado rose. "Say, you'd better steer clear o' Miss Jane. In fac' I'd advise you to sell your ranch and clear plumb out of these parts."

Griff shrugged in silent contempt. An hombre of Spike Dunham's tiny mind and tinier spirit could never gauge the mettle of a real man; and yet this hooligan was echoing what Jane herself had said. On a quick impulse he dropped his intention to confront Spike with the ranchwoman and make him eat crow. There were some things that could be clarified here and now.

He ordered Spike to dismount, then did so himself. His captive eyed him sullenly. "Whatcha aimin' to do, shoot me down in cold blood?"

"No, though perhaps I should. I'm going to ask you some questions. And if you don't tell me the truth—well, I'll force you to draw and sure as hell kill you."

Spike Dunham's nerve, such as it was, broke. "I got a sore arm; I can't defend myself. Go ahead and ast."

"Did Miss Deering have anything to do with the trap you fellows led me into?"

"Nope, she didn't. Blake cooked it up an' made me help him; he made me do all the other stuff too."

"How come he can make you do things?"

Spike was sweating profusely, and there was a truthful ring to his words, "'Cause he's got me hornswoggled two ways. You know that little place acrost the breaak in the hills. That's mine, but you might say it's Blake's. He's got a mortgage on it owin' to a big poker debt I owe him. I think he's light-fingered with a deck o' cards, but what I think can't do me no good at this stage o' the game. If I don't cough

up some way or anuther he'll foreclose on the few piddlin' acres I got—and that ain't all he'll do.

"An' the other way he's got me dead to rights is worse. Prob'ly you didn't know I been in the pen. Don't ast me what I done; I'm tellin' you enough as it is. And I'd be bustin' rock yet only for Blake; he got me paroled in his custardy, is it? Got me the Triple X job, too.

"But he didn't do it out of no love; I kin see that. He wanted somebody that'd have to help him pull off whatever monkeyshines he might think up. He told me without makin' any bones that he'd have my parole—provoked, is it?—and land me back in the jug unless I done what he wanted of me, even if it was gunnin' for somebody. I was born kinda gun-shy, but I got a weak back too, and that rock pile ain't gonna make it no weaker, not if I kin help it."

Spike continued his sorry recital. "Dang it, Larsen, I guess you're doin' me a favor in the long run. I been doin' a lot of thinkin' these last few minutes. You crackin' down on me like this made me use my noodle an' my mind's made up. I got a few piddlin' dollars I been holdin' out on Blake—enough to take me way-to-hell away from here, I'll go off somewheres an' change my name; let the dang property go—I might better lose it thisaway than by gettin' a dose of lead poison from some hombre Blake sics me on. He'll never find me, nor neither will the parole off'cers..."

Griff was no longer listening. He'd heard just about everything he needed to put the puzzle together. So Spike had simply been Roy Blake's slave, helping him steal Jane Deering's stock—which they then drove to Spike's little place and presumably sold from there—and serving as his trigger-man through a dread of the "rock pile" that was even greater than his craven repugnance to gunplay.

Griff turned the convict-cowman loose at the crossroads and resumed his ride to the Triple X.

TRIUMPHANT, but a bit nervous, he mounted the steps of Jane's veranda, brushing off his pants legs and tucking his shirt in.

Jane, flashing an engaging smile, stood in the doorway.

"Howdy, Jane. It was mighty fine of you to get me out of jail—before you knew what I'm going to tell you now. I caught up with Spike and he spilled the beans right and left, about him—and your fine foreman—swiping your livestock."

"I suppose," she observed, "the information was voluntary, not given at gunpoint or anything like that?" But she kept on smiling in a way that robbed the sarcasm of its sting.

She led the way into the ranch house, to the big room with the bookshelves. "Say," he asked, "how'd you know I was in the jug anyway?"

"I was over to your place. Didn't think I took that much interest in you, did you? Your grand old partner told me about it."

Griff was feeling better by the minute. "Wonder if you're willing *now* to tell me what Roy Blake is to you?"

"Well, yes—he's my foster brother, my stepmother's son. He'd been dad's foreman, and I naturally kept him on after dad died and I inherited the ranch."

"Then he has no claim on you?"

"None except a claim of family sympathy, and he seems to have forfeited that. But"—she toyed with the leaves of a window geranium—"why do you ask?"

"Here's why." Griff boldly took her in his arms. "I wonder if that job of foreman without wages is open; surely, you can't have that fellow around after the stuff he's pulled."

The room was a blur to them as they stood alone. He kissed her, and she

responded with surprising fervor. Neither of them heard the door open softly; but in a moment Griff heard the cocking of a gun. He whirled, pushing Jane out of the line of fire.

The man in the doorway fired thunderingly. Griff's gun roared in reply—but he felt a searing stab in his shoulder and now the warm trickle of blood down his back. He felt faint from shock.

Blake stood shaking his right hand, from which a red tide fairly gushed.

In a split second Jane galvanized into action. She dashed over, snatched up the smoking sixgun Blake had dropped, and ran back to Griff.

"Oh, Griff, are you hurt much?" She knelt and examined the shoulder that was bleeding profusely.

Griff gritted his teeth. "Give him back his gun; I'll settle his hash. I want to finish the sneak, but not while he's disarmed."

"No, Griff, no, there'll be no more shooting."

HE DRAGGED himself up, but let her lead him to the sofa and lay down at her bidding. He saw her leave the room with both their guns; then he turned to Bake, who leaned against the marble-topped stand groaning, probably more in sheer chagrin than pain.

"Jane tells me you're her stepbrother; but that doesn't explain why you've got it in for me. I hope you realize you might have killed her with your crazy gunplay."

Blake's eyes flashed hatred. "If you had any sense you could figure it out yourself."

Then Jane was back, dressing Blake's wounded hand. "Roy, Griff would have been justified in shooting you through the heart instead of in the gun-hand. I hope you understand you're not foreman here any more."

Completing her work, she came over to Griff, and he saw tears in her eyes.

"I've sent one of the men to town for the doctor," she told him.

The newly unemployed Blake cursed softly. "You both might as well know the truth—I've wanted Jane, yes, ever since we were kids together. When you came around I noticed you were the man she danced with the oftenest, and I even heard her make favorable remarks about you. And for your part I figured you were after her and her big empire of ranchland. Well, I was right, that's plain enough."

Jane's expression was a blend of indignation and shock. "You took an odd way to show your affection—stealing my cattle."

Roy Blake snorted. "Damn it, woman, don't you suppose I needed more than the pittance of a salary you've been paying me? I'm a gambling man, and no piker either. Spike owed me money he couldn't pay me, and on top of that other fellows had me in the same hole I had him in. I had to do something."

"Yes; Benedict Arnold had excuses, too," Jane observed; and Roy Blake flinched, his truculence dissolving.

After pondering a moment, Jane again addressed herself to her no longer blustering foster brother. "I won't prefer charges against you if you'll promise to clear out and never show your face around here again—also not to make any more trouble for Griff or anyone else."

"It's a bargain, Jane." The ex-foreman's voice was almost penitent; he slithered out.

When they were alone Griff realized that Jane had somehow managed to stop the flow of blood from his shoulder. But he had lost enough to weaken him beyond his being able to get up. He heard his voice, amazingly faint, apologizing for staining the sofa's horsehair.

"Never mind that—and don't try to get up," Jane was saying. "I'll fix you a hot whiskey sling; that'll brace you up until the doctor comes."

In a few minutes he was sipping the hot drink and she was cutting his shirt so she could remove it without starting up the bleeding. He looked up at her. "I hope you realize you haven't answered my question."

"What question?"

"About the foreman job without wages but with a pretty girl in connection with it."

She was holding the slashed and bloody shirt. "Don't talk any more, Griff; the doctor will be here any minute. You've lost a lot of blood."

"But I've got to know. And—there's Jim—I wonder if you—" his voice trailed off.

But he didn't lose unconsciousness until he'd heard her say, "Oh, Griff—I'm yours and so is the job. Certainly we'll have Jim here..."

★

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THE TONKAWAS

by Albert Abarbanel

SQUEAMISH historians make no mention of cannibalism in America. Yet it's a fact that all the Indian tribes of the Texas coast and back country practiced it, at one time. The very name of the Attakapas means "Man-eaters;" members of La Salle's expedition who were captured by the Karankam Tribe of Matagorda Bay and were lucky enough to escape, gave an eye-witness account of barbarous feasts.

By far the worst offenders were the Tonkawa Indians. They were fierce fighters and fine hunters of unusual physique, and remarkably handsome; according to hearsay, they might have served as models for classic Greek sculpture. They wore long black locks, and a haughty manner, and little else, for they went about naked to the breechcloth. Each carried a six-foot bow and was an excellent shot.

But this physical beauty did not extend to their natures. In addition to the cult of cannibalism, they were reputed as ill-natured vagabonds and not averse to thievery.

The Tonkawas lived in scattered villages, which they abandoned from time to time for the needs of the hunt or as the spirit moved them. They hunted the buffalo—more correctly the bison—and this great economic beast filled all their needs. When their buffalo range was cut off by the Comanches, they fell back on deer-hunting, which they pursued with equal success.

Cannibalism among the Tonkawas was never a matter of desperate necessity. It was deeply rooted in their beliefs; for Tonkawa legend teaches that the tribe is descended from a wolf, and emulating that venerable ancestor it must keep on the move and live entirely by hunting. In their pantomine ritual dance, Tonkawas disguised themselves as wolves, and dug a man from the ground where he had been hidden. To him was recited the tribal tradition of the wolf, with a stern command not to depart from its ways.

Naturally this injunction was not calculated to make friends. In practice it led to an ardent devotion to cannibalism, and the Tonkawas soon found every red man's hand turned against them; they became an outlaw tribe.

In the early eighteenth century, Missions were established to bring wandering tribes into the fold. A score or so were brought together in San Antonio, San Jose and the Alamo, and among them were bands of Tonkawas. But the

free and open life was too strong a lure, and the Tonkawas were soon roaming the Texas plains again.

IN 1817, THEIR cannibalism brought on a series of wars with their Indian neighbors. These wars threatened to become a permanent way of life—or rather, death—for great numbers of the Tonkawas were wiped out. There are records of battles with the Attakapas in which both sides engaged in orgies of human flesh-eating.

So universally were they shunned, that when the Americans occupied the territory, the Tonkawas hired themselves out as Scouts against the hostile Indian tribes, out of vengeance for the slights they had suffered.

For this perfidy, the Tonkawas paid dearly. Their association with tough garrisons completely demoralized them. Little credit to the white man that by 1849 the once-proud Tonkawas were reduced to seven hundred shiftless and degraded vagabonds.

Their troubles with the white men were never over. In 1857 the Tonkawas together with several other small tribes were herded by the government into a reservation on the upper Brazos River. This in no way suited the Texans; they declared themselves opposed to any Indian tribes remaining inside the Texas borders. With this high-minded object they attacked the Agency, fired on the soldiers, killed the Agent and scattered the Indians to the winds. Some three hundred survivors were rounded up and shipped to a new reservation in Indian Territory.

Those were troubled days. There were three short years of peace—and then the Civil War came on like a storm and the white man's world was torn asunder. Emissaries from North and South beat at the door of the Indian tribes, each urging them to take sides against the other.

The five "civilized" tribes of the Territory were themselves slaveholders. Stand White, a Cherokee chieftain, held a commission in the Confederate forces, and his men stood with him.

Other tribes didn't see it that way. The Delawares and Shawnees fled north to Kansas, abandoning their property; the plains Indians, Kiowas and Comanches, turned a deaf ear and set up a strict neutrality under which they raided both sides with benevolent impartiality. The Tonkawas chose to remain where they were.

It was a fateful decision. There were few tribes who had not suffered by the defection of the Tonkawas, as well as by their taste for human flesh. Now white man was fighting white man, and those the Tonkawas had served so faithfully as guides were much too busy to bother about the safety of their charges. The enemies of the Tonkawas —and that seemed to be just about everyone—had long waited for such an opportunity.

The Tonkawa tepees were scattered over a high plateau overlooking the bottom lands of the Washita. On the opposite side of the river was the Anadorka Agency in charge of Colonel Leiper, with a nearby trading post kept by Dr. Shirley, and another house occupied by Horace Jones, the interpreter. All these men were either in the Confederate Service or in sympathy with it.

The night of October 22, 1862, found the white men in the Agency building sitting up late around the fire, for the air was brisk and cold. Suddenly a blood-curling scream shattered the darkness; Indians were attacking. A volley poured through the window. Three men fell.

JONES, THE interpreter, leaped for his horse and made for the Agent's house. Forewarned, the latter scrambled into the undergrowth where he hid until morning. The Indians slaughtered the white employees, plundered the commissary, and burned the agency to the ground.

A man named Sturm was the only

Agency survivor, and it was he who told the tragic tale and its aftermath.

The attackers numbered about 440 warriors, mounted and armed. Of that number some ninety were Shawnees and the rest Delawares, Wichitas, Kickapoos and a scattering from all the neighboring tribes. This was the day of vengeance, and grudges were to be paid off.

Under attack were three hundred Tonkawas under their chieftain Placido. Though taken by surprise in their sleep and outnumbered, they gave a good account of themselves. Placido himself killed the Shawnee chief, but a moment later a dozen bullets riddled his body. No mercy was expected, none given. The Tonkawas held out stubbornly for several hours, long enough for some of the women and children to escape to the hills. When it was over, 137 Tonkawas—nearly half the tribe—lay dead.

The attackers drew off across the river, and Sturm gathered up the pitiful remnants of the Tonkawas—most of them wounded—and escorted them to Fort Arbuckle to safety.

On the march, Sturm first noticed dripping pieces of flesh hung from saddle bows. And in the midst of the procession, under close guard, he beheld two Shawnee prisoners.

When the Tonkawas made camp that night, one of the unfortunate captives was slain, cut into pieces and thrown into the kettles. Sturm looked on at the preparations but could do nothing to prevent them. After their orgy he watched the Tonkawas sing and dance in savage exultation.

Official reports call this an action between Union and Confederate Indian Forces. Though it was true that Union officers armed the marauding tribes, there is no proof that either side encouraged barbarities.

The Tonkawas never recovered from the blow. They drifted back into Texas, taking up their old work as scouts against the Comanches and thereby

building up a new backlog of hate. Comanche chiefs again and again accused the despised tribe of cannibalistic rites.

In 1874, rumor had it that other tribes were uniting again to exterminate the remaining Tonkawas. The outcasts were hastily gathered into Fort Griffin, Texas, and another massacre prevented.

At that time the Tonkawas numbered only 119. An Agent was appointed for these remnants of the tribe in 1882, and three years later they were settled at the Oakland Agency in Ponta. In 1892 there were only 66 Tonkawas, and by 1908 they had dwindled to 56.

Many are the gruesome tales told of the man-eaters. It seems their feasts were not confined to prisoners of war; often they lay in wait for any solitary traveller who came their way. Such an episode is related by White Tooth, an aged Lipan:

A captured Comanche boy living with White Tooth disappeared one day, and as he had been seen last near the camp of the Tonkawas, White Tooth demanded the boy's return.

The Tonkawas offered him a peace-pipe, and after this ritual informed him that the boy had been slain as a member of an enemy tribe. They offered to compensate White Tooth, and in the friendliest fashion invited him to stay for dinner.

The feast began at noon and lasted till the last morsel was finished, when the ceremonial dancing started. White Tooth saw the body of the young victim "chopped up and thrown into a pot".

In 1896 the Tonkawa chieftain was Sentali, also known as Grant Richard, a powerful man of forty-five. He had

survived the great massacre when his mother hid him in a deep basin now known as Cedar Spring.

Sentali described the burial rites of his people. The warrior was placed in a deep grave and all his small belongings with him. The earth was filled in, and on the mound so formed his horse and dog were shot. Thereafter one and all were forbidden ever to mention his name again; whenever possible the dead warrior's heart was exchanged for that of a human victim.

The few remaining Tonkawas have now intermarried with other tribes. They are the last reminders of a time —not so long ago—when cannibals dwelt among our forefathers.

KNOW YORE WEST

Quiz Feature by James A. Hines

HOW MANY of these "know yore west terms" have been correctly described? Mark them with *T* for *True* and *F* for *False*, and then check yourself against the definitions. If you answer eighteen or more you are a sagebrusher from 'way back. If you answer sixteen or more you are in the *Mayordomo* bracket. If you answer less than sixteen it means you are a tenderfoot. Good luck, pardner!

1.	Bronc Busting	Teaching a horse to neck rein
2.	Buckaroo	Another name for a cowboy
3.	Bulldogging	Riding a wild steer
4.	Chapparral	A bushy growth found in the Southwest
5.	Cutting	Another term for branding a steer
6.	Cactus	A thorny plant of the Southwest desert
7.	Cinch	A cowboy's name for his pack saddle
8.	Chuck Wagon	A kitchen of wheels that follows the roundup
9.	Dude	A person who comes West for adventure and excitement
10.	Homesteader	One who settles on a government claim
11.	Lasso	A cowboy name for a rope halter
12.	Night Herder	A person who night rides after cattle, sometimes used as a reference to a rustler
13.	Outlaw Horse	A wild untamed horse
14.	Pronto	Means to slow down, to stop
15.	Peeler	An expert who breaks a bronc
16.	Pinto	A solid white pony
17.	Rawhide	A crude leather made from cowhide
18.	Reata	A cowboy's grass rope
19.	Savvy	Means to understand
20.	Road Brand	A cattle king's brand

(Answers are on Page 98)

Rich Bar needed cleaning up badly, and Ned Griff was just the man to do it — for the worst of reasons. He had to wipe out the existing parasites before he could take over. And naturally, the townsfolk would take to him while he was apparently fighting for law and order . . .

MY GUN IS BOSS!

Feature Novel of Outlaw Cunning

by E. E. CLEMENT

ON THE BROW of the hill which overlooked the Californian mining town of Rich Bar, on that August day in 1875, stood a horse and rider, looking down on the scene beneath.

It was late afternoon, almost sundown, and the town was like many others the rider had seen—a straggling street of dust beside which huddled, leaned, or frowned several buildings —a livery stable; a jail; a meeting house or church; a saloon; some assay offices; an eatery and rooming house; a bank; a Wells Fargo office; a general store and some residences. Further back was a small crushing mill, and scattered over the hillsides were the shafts of mines. There were also two farms in view.

Yes, it was the usual Western mining town, but the rider who inspected it was not exactly usual. He was a hard-bitten looking man, about thirty in years, clean-shaven, with longish sandy hair. He looked his age, his face being lined by the weather and the sun, but it was not an unprepossessing face. There was rugged strength in it, and women would be attracted by the reckless glint of the eyes, the upward slant of the corners of his mouth, the firmness of his chin. He was of medium height, and not heavily built, but his main strength lay in the speed of his movements when he chose to move fast.

He was dressed in a red cambric shirt; a blue bandana; a wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hat with a whang strap hanging loosely beneath his chin; a black coat, and pants tucked into high riding boots. Most of his clothes were fairly worn, but still good. Behind him was a saddle-pack, and at his right knee rode a long rifle in a saddle scabbard. Slung from each hip, and riding on his thighs, were two Rogers and Spencer forty-four six-guns. They were well worn and rode in oiled holsters, their butts available for instant handling.

The name of the man was Ned Griff, and he was "wanted" under another name in Nevada and Texas. He had been an outlaw for some years and he had killed; but he was proud of one thing—if it was a thing to be proud of—he had always given the other man first draw.

Now he was tired of being chased from place to place. He had decided to give up the game—*after* he had filled his pockets. He had left his old haunts and his old companions far behind and meant to start afresh, perhaps in Mexico. But he wanted a stake for his new start and Rich Bar was going to give him a stake.

He clicked his tongue to the big sorrel he rode, and the horse moved forward down the hill at a steady canter. He clattered over a rough wooden bridge which covered a stream that was more rocks than water, and entered the main street. He was pleased to see that, even at this hour, it was a fairly busy place. Some of the buildings had wooden sidewalks before them and people were moving about their business. The saloon, which rejoiced in the name of *The Deep Strike,* was a fairly large one, and all the signs pointed to prosperity.

He rode through the wide door into the smithy and livery stables. A man was lighting an oil lamp that hung from the center of the roof. He was a tall, angular man, about forty, with a large sweeping moustache. He wore one gun, and his hat was on the back of his head. He looked up as Ned entered and d i s m o u n t e d. "Howdy, Stranger."

"Howdy," said Ned, watching the man hang the lamp, as he loosened his horse's girth. "Can I bed my hoss here?"

"Shore. Take any empty stall with the rails down. Two dollars a day with feed."

"Suits me," said Ned. "Better have a look at his off-hind shoe. I think he needs a new un."

"Yuh want it done rightaways?"

"Nope, tomorrow will do. I'm stayin' a few days. Whar's a good place to bed down?"

"Fletcher's Hotel be the on'y place. They'll fix yuh up. My name's Bill Collins—I own this livery."

"Good to know yuh, Bill. I'm Ned Griff, jest lookin' f'r a spot to settle down. What kinda place is this?"

Collins leaned across a post and picked his teeth with a piece of hay. "Purty wild," he said, watching Ned work on his horse. "No town f'r a tenderfoot."

Ned grinned. "Do I look a tenderfoot?"

"I wasn't sayin' yuh did; I was jest remarkin' it was a wild town."

Ned gave his horse a thorough grooming, and then stripped in a shed across the back yard and slooshed some water over himself. He had shaved that morning by a creek. He slicked back his hair with a broken comb and came out of the shed, feeling much better and ready to face the world—and especially a large steak.

Night had now fallen and there was no moon. Ned was about to move across the yard to the back of the livery and through it to the main street when he heard voices quite close. They were the voices of a girl and a man. He did not want to listen to any love confidences; neither did he want to burst out of the darkness of the shed suddenly and embarrass the pair, who may have been standing around the corner of the shed some time.

While he was making up his mind he realized that this was no conversation of sweet nothings.

"But what can I do?" asked the man. "I cannot control another man's actions; he's old enough to know his own mind, and I cannot order him about."

"You can bar him from the saloon," said the girl. "Then he would have nowhere to go and would do some work instead of wasting all Ma's money on

liquor and gambling. You could do that."

"Mebbe I could do thet," said the man, "but yore brother would find some other place to spend his time and money."

"Where?" asked the girl. "You know as well as I do, Harry Jordan, that there is no other place that Ralph could go. You own the saloon and you could refuse him admittance. Then Ma could be happy again."

"I ain't interested in yore Ma," said the man, "but I could bar Ralph—on condition."

"What condition?" asked the girl suspiciously.

The man's voice lowered a little, became oily. "Yuh on'y have to be nice to me. Now if yuh—"

"No!" the girl interrupted sharply.

NED LEANED against the shed wall, listening and thinking. This affair was nothing to do with him. He had his own business to look after, without bothering with other people's troubles. Yet there was something in the girl's voice that he liked, and more in the man's voice that he did not like—

"Don't be a little fool!" the man was saying. "Yuh want Ralph barred from the *Deep Strike*. All right. I'll do thet—but not for nothing. I'm soft on yuh, Rose. Yuh and me could get together and—here, give me a little kiss."

Jordan grabbed the girl suddenly, but paused as he heard a pebble roll behind him.

"Jest a moment," said a quiet voice, and Jordan turned to see a stranger standing in the dim light.

"What do yuh want?" he barked, still gripping the girl's arm.

Ned shrugged. "Nothing very much; Jest let go o' thet girl and be on yore way."

"Who the hell are yuh?" snapped Jordan, releasing the girl and diving his hand towards his gun.

But Ned was too close to him. His left hand brushed Jordan's hand away from the gun, while his right hand came up and clipped the saloon-keeper on the side of the jaw. Jordan fell on his back. Ned leant over him, jerked the gun from its holster and threw it into the darkness. "Yuh better git up and git hitchin'."

Jordan could not think of anything to say. His head was reeling and there was blood in his mouth. The girl still stood in the semi-darkness.

"Don't yuh worry about yore brother, miss," said Ned. "I'll git him outta the saloon—and this hombre will bar him, or nothin' will bar this coyote from a trip to Boothill."

He bent down and jerked Jordan to his feet. He gave Jordan a shove and the saloon-keeper staggered off into the darkness.

The girl took a long breath. "Thank you," she said; "what is your name?"

"Ned Griff, ma'am. A cowpoke jest passin' through. But I'll be here a few days and I'll see about yore brother. What's he like?"

"Tall and fair, twenty years old, with a thin, straggly beard."

Ned grinned. "Bein' growed up eh? I know the type. He'll be all right in a year or so. Jest keep him straight till then. How come yuh was here in the dark with a skunk like Jordan?"

"He asked me to come here to talk about my brother. I didn't think he had any notions—" She paused in embarrassment.

"It should be a warnin' to yuh," said Ned; "now yuh go along home and I'll send Ralph to yuh."

He turned and walked across the yard and through the livery. The place was empty at the moment. Collins was very likely eating his supper. Ned rode his guns up and down in their holsters a couple of times, and cursed himself for a fool. Why had he got mixed up in this small town affair? Why couldn't he stop interfering?

He turned up the main street. The

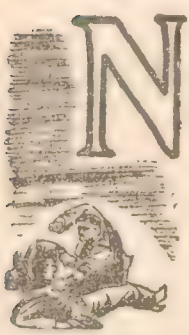
saloon was only a couple of doors along on the same side. It had no porch, the swinging doors opening directly from the sidewalk.

Ned stepped along briskly, reached the doors, pushed both open and stepped inside.

There was absolute silence. Seated at the tables were a few men who might have been miners. Behind the bar was Harry Jordan, a half-smile on his face. At one table sat a young man who answered the description of the girl's brother. Ranged round the walls were six men and each held a sixgun in his hand, pointed at Ned!

"Yuh wantin' somethin'?" asked Jordan.

— 2 —



NED HAD taken in the whole scene in one flash of his eyes. In fact, he had seen more—including the fact that the small barroom was lighted by two large oil lamps hanging from the roof beams.

"Seems like I was expected," he drawled—then went into sudden action.

His two hands streaked for his guns —they were in his hands as he jumped backwards firing with each one—he leapt sideways. The speed of his actions was faster than the men who had him covered could think; it was also unexpected. Their bullets came a split-second too late—striking the closing doors, humming across the street into the buildings opposite, thudding into the saloon wall. But none of them hit Ned, while his two snap shots had each reached its target—the hanging lamps —which had expired in a final flash of flame.

Ned did not stand around. He knew that no one would stop in that saloon with all that smoke. Each cardboard cartridge case carried about forty grains of black powder. Two shots in a fair-sized room emptied that room speedily of choking, crying inmates. And there must have been at least half a dozen shots fired in that saloon.

Ned knew they would not come through the front doors, where he might be waiting. They would go through the windows or back door and would be speeding round looking for him.

He ran across the street, his eyes busy. He saw one particular building. The light from the doorway illuminated a sign: "Fletcher's Hotel and Restaurant." That's what he was looking for. He needed a feed right now and he needed a room, too, but he would later have to get his saddlebags from the livery. He holstered his guns.

He dived into the open doorway and found himself in a passage. People alarmed by the shots were pouring from a wide door on his left. Looking past them he saw that they came from a dining room. He slackened his pace and walked casually down the passage.

"What's goin' on out thar?" a man asked him.

"Danged if I know," he said; "some ruckus in the saloon, I reckon."

He pushed past and looked round for a vacant place. A voice spoke at his elbow. "What happened?"

It was the voice of the girl he had heard in the semi-darkness of the livery shed. He turned now and looked at her in the light. And she was worth looking at—a blonde about eighteen, with blue eyes and a kissable mouth. She was not very tall, but she had curves. She was wearing no hat, and had on an apron.

"What are yuh doin' here?" he asked.

"I'm Rose Fletcher; my mother keeps this place. Is Ralph all right?"

"Yep, he's O.K., but I failed yuh. Yuh see, they was lined up waitin' for

me with drawn guns. But I'll go back later when I got a feed under my belt."

"No," she said, "you'd better not; they'll kill you."

He grinned. "Yuh leave it to me. Whar can I sit?"

She led him to a place, talking meanwhile. "You don't know what you're up against. This is a bad town, run by a few men—all bad men."

"What about the sheriff?" Ned said, as he sat down.

"He is useless; they keep him drunk and helpless."

"Who's they?"

"Harry Jordan, Bill Collins, the liveryman, and Fred Mason, the storekeeper. They have joined together to run the town. They charge their own prices. If anyone else tries to set up in business, they run them out or have them shot. They have more than half a dozen gunslicks to help them."

"Sounds interestin'," said Ned. "But can I have a steak—one about half as big as a steer will do."

While the girl was getting the steak, Ned thought over what he had learned. Well, he need have no twinges of conscience about robbing these men—except the Wells Fargo agent and the banker, who did not seem to be members of the gang. But before he could do much for himself he would have to break up this gang. They would be dangerous to have around—especially as they were already his enemies. When the girl came back, he had a couple of questions to ask her. "How do the miners and farmers and the rest of the townsfolk like this setup?"

"They don't, but what can they do? They are all afraid of the gang. If one of them refuses to do what he is told, his body is found in the creek, or one of the gunslicks throws down on him in the saloon. They want things changed, of course, but they have to deal off the smithy, the store and the saloon. There are no others."

"Who is in charge of the town? Have you a mayor?"

"No. Neither Jordan, Collins nor Mason have troubled to get themselves elected, and no one else has the courage."

"Thanks," he said, and set about the steak.

When he had finished the meal he went out the door. A man was leaning against the doorframe of the saloon. He saw Ned and went inside immediately. Ned smiled dryly, walked along the street, then crossed to the livery. It was still empty, so he picked up his saddlebags and took them back to the hotel. He dumped them on the floor of the passage just as Rose was passing.

"Would yuh book me a room?" he asked her. "One in front would be best, from whar I could see thet saloon. You c'n put them bags in thar—I'm goin' across to the saloon to git yore brother."

"Oh, no," she said, looking anxious. "You should forget it. You don't realize what those men are like."

"They don't realize what *I'm* like," said Ned. "But they will. I'll go out yore back way. They're keepin' an eye on the front."

SHE SHOWED him the way out to the back lot. He crossed it and several others before he slipped up an alley between two buildings. The street was dark here; there were a few pedestrians about and a wagon moving slowly. He crossed the road quickly and dived into another alley, gaining the lots behind the buildings. He went along carefully until he was behind the saloon.

He had expected some sort of guard there, for he would have posted a guard if he had been Jordan. But then Jordan did not know with whom he was dealing and no doubt felt secure. After all, he had a gang of gunslicks, who had always handled matters before; he had enjoyed immunity for a long time. Why should he worry because a stranger had come into town and annoyed him? The

stranger must show up some time and then they would get him.

Ned intended to show up, but not in the way Jordan expected. He slipped across the yard of the saloon and the dark opening of the back door loomed before him.

His right hand hovering over his holster, he stepped into the darkness and stood listening. Some distance ahead of him he could see a streak of light under a door. He fancied that door led into the bar. Jordan had replaced the lights, very likely from this passage or one of the rooms, for the place was very dark.

Ned felt his way along. His hand touched the balustrade of a staircase leading upwards and he fixed that in his mind. It was better to have an idea of the layout of the place. He had previously noticed that the large frame building was two-storied.

He came to the door at the end and felt for the handle. There was plenty of noise on the other side. He turned the knob and edged the door open a crack. He could get a fair view of the saloon. The place was crowded, mainly with miners. Behind the bar were Jordan and another man, serving drinks. There was no dance area or dance girls, the whole floor—except for a space about the centre—being taken up with gaming tables. Ned wagered himself there were some crooked games going on there.

Ned could pick four of Jordan's gunslicks, because they were merely scattered about the walls, leaning against the timber with their thumbs hooked in their belts, their eyes roaming over the room. Jordan and the bartender would also be dangers; and there would surely be others, either running the gambling games or playing.

The bar ran along the wall facing the front entrance, and the door Ned was using for observation was near one end of the counter. He swung it open suddenly, stepped through, pulled a man out of his way who was standing at the bar, vaulted over the counter to the other side, and landed with a gun in his right hand.

He stepped up to the surprised Jordan, gun aimed, and jerked a gun from the saloon-keeper's holster. He threw it on the floor. The bartender was not wearing a gun, but there was one on a shelf under the counter. Ned tossed that on the floor, too. Then keeping one corner of his eye for Jordan and the bartender, he raised his voice, and he had a very loud voice.

"Gents!" he roared, a gun now also in his left hand. "Move back and give me room and listen to me."

The chatter of voices, the shuffle of feet, the rattle of tankards died out swiftly. The men standing along the bar retreated before his waving guns.

One of those guns suddenly spurted fire and a man across the room bent over suddenly. His gun fell from his hand and he dropped across a blackjack table, then slid to the floor.

"Don't worry about him," said Ned, fanning the smoke aside. "He's dead—and so will anyone else be who tries to draw a gun! But otherwise I'm harmless as a newborn babe! All I want is to put a proposition to yuh. I believe this here town is livin' under a reign o' fear, and thet ain't right. And when things ain't right I try to set 'em right—with my gun. Seems like yuh gotta lot o' gun bosses right now, but one gun boss would be better. Would thet gent stop scratchin', hisself over thar—it makes my trigger finger itchy. Jest keep still, everybody, and hear me out. Wal, I believe yuh got no one in charge o' this here town; yuh got no mayor. We should have someone we can take our troubles to. I'm jest a stranger who rode in not much more'n an hour agone, and the first time I walks into this saloon I'm met by a battery o' guns. Now thet ain't right, and I aim to do somethin' about it, even if it means eliminatin' all those guns. Now I ain't talkin' to Jordan or his gunslicks—I'm talkin' to yuh other gents.

I'm takin' over the town! Are yuh with me?"

- 3 -

THERE WAS a roar of voices, some cheers and much laughter. The miners, farmers, and other townsfolk were not sure what all this was about, but they were enjoying themselves.

"Good," said Ned; "now yuh got no mayor and yuh oughtta have one. I'm nominatin' myself for the post. Any objections?"

"Yes," barked Jordan; "yuh ain't got no—"

"Shut up," said Ned; "yuh ain't got no vote."

There was a roar of laughter.

"Any other nominations?" asked Ned.

"Yes," said a voice.

"Stand up and let's see yuh, pard," said Ned, and a fat man stood up from a table where he had been playing cards. "What's yore monicker?"

"Fred Mason. I own the store in the town and—"

"That's all I wanted to know. Any further nominations?... No? All right. We'll take a show of hands—"

"What about the other people in the town?" barked Mason. "They're entitled to vote."

"They should be at the election," said Ned. "Who is runnin' this show—yuh or me? Yuh wait until yo're elected. I'll take a show of hands. All those in favor of Mason bein' mayor. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. What are yore names, friends?"

"What have their names to do with it?" asked Jordan.

"I want to know who's agin me, don't I? I don't want to slug any wrong persons. Keep yore hands up; now what's yore name?"

"Red Maley."

"I take it yuh are one o' Jordan's gunslicks. All right, Red; mebbe yuh can tell me the name o' the guy who died?"

"Slim Thompson."

"Now the rest of yuh. Mason makes two—now yuh others."

"Pat Flanigan."

"Jim Tate."

"Chick Fallon."

"Trigger Jackson."

"Pete Thor."

"Thanks. Now, hands up those in favor of me bein' mayor."

There was a roar of laughter as the hands went up. The men were still not taking this seriously, although the dead man on the floor should have told them it was serious enough, if informal.

"What!" said Ned. "Yuh, Ralph Fletcher—ain't yuh votin' either way? Can never make up yore mind, eh? Wal, it looks like I'm elected mayor, and I thank yuh, gents, one and all. Now I begin issuing orders for the good of the community. First—Ralph Fletcher, yuh go home to yore mother and sister and stay thar; yuh ain't allowed in this saloon, or I'll lock yuh up."

"*Yuh'll* lock me up!" snapped Ralph.

"Shore! Didn't I tell yuh? Now I'm mayor I'm entitled to fire and appoint sheriffs. I'm firin' the old one and puttin' myself in his place. Now git out, afore I start by lockin' yuh up."

The young man rose sulkily and pushed his way through the crowd to the door.

"Now, gents," said Ned, "I'm purty shore them games are crooked. Just smash up thet roulette wheel to begin with—"

"Hey!" cried Jordan, as hands began to tear the wheel apart. "Thet's private property; yuh can't—"

"One more peep outta yuh and I'll shut yore mouth for keeps," said Ned. "I'd jest love doin' it, too. I'm runnin' this town, see. Gents, if those I point

out would draw guns and aim them at Jordan's gunslicks, with their fingers tight on the triggers, I will make a dignified exit. Don't worry about these hombres any more. If they try any four-flushin', yuh just tell me and I'll shoot the ears off 'em."

He leapt across the bar counter, his guns still in his hands, pointed severally to half-a-dozen men, who each drew guns, rather gleefully, and aimed them at Jordan's men. Ned had picked men he could be reasonably sure were more or less out of sympathy with the gang; men who had held their hands highest during the voting. Ned did not neglect his own caution, however; he progressed to the doors in a series of swift turns, his guns always before him.

In the doorway he stopped. Wal, gents," he said, "I thank yuh again—and I can tell those who are agin me that I have a good memory. I'll remember their names and I'll remember their faces, so that I can put both up at Boothill."

He went swiftly out into the night and walked quickly along the sidewalk towards the end of the town where he had seen the jail.

Ned found a light shining through the open door of the combined jail and marshal's office. He walked up the two steps and entered the office. A tall, slim man with grey hair and moustache was seated behind a table on which stood two bottles and a glass. It was plain that the man was besotted with drink. He rolled in his seat and had difficulty in fixing his eyes on Ned.

"WHAT YUH want, Stranger?" he asked thickly. "I'm Sheriff Roley Ferguson."

Ned walked across the room, leaned over and unhooked the star from the man's shirt. "Not now," he said. "I'm Ned Griff new mayor of Rich Bar. I'm firin' yuh and takin' over the sheriff's job myself."

Ferguson blinked at Ned. "Wassat?"

"I'm the new mayor of Rich Bar," repeated Ned. "Duly appointed by a gatherin' o' citizens; I'm firin' yuh and takin' yore job."

The information leaked into the man's mind. He took a deep breath. "What hev I done? What has Jordan got against me?"

"Nothin'. Jordan didn't send me. I'm workin' agin Jordan."

The sheriff stared and shook his head. "Yo're mad, son—plumb loco; they'll bash yuh."

"Thet's my affair," said Ned, pinning the badge to his coat. "Now git out and take yore dunnage with yuh—afore I throw yuh out."

Ferguson shrugged. "I'll go," he said; "I'll go see Jordan and find out what I done."

He teetered to his feet, then staggered across the floor and out the door, almost falling down the two steps. Ned began to tidy up the place, which was in a filthy condition. He piled all the late sheriff's goods near the door.

Suddenly it struck him that he should look around the building. He went through a door to one side and found himself in a passage. It was dark, so he struck a match, saw a lamp hanging and reached up and applied the match to it. He suddenly felt that there were eyes upon him, and he looked round swiftly, his hand halfway to his gun—and looked directly into the eyes of a young man.

Ned relaxed. The young man, who was rather good-looking and about twenty-two, was behind a wall of bars, as he was in one of the two cells. He was staring at the badge on Ned's coat. "Who are yuh?" he asked.

"Name's Ned Griff—sheriff and mayor o' Rich Bar," said the outlaw, with a slight smile. "And who are yuh?"

"What happened to Ferguson?"

"It was yore turn to answer a question. Ferguson's left; who are yuh and what are yuh doin' here?"

The eyes of the young man shot sparks. "Yuh know dang well who I am and what I'm doin' here," he said.

Ned considered the prisoner for a moment. "I see," he said. "Yuh think I'm one of Jordan's gang; yo're wrong. But yuh remind me thet I should've closed the front door, or they'll be throwin' slugs at me through it."

He went back into the office, approached the door from the side and closed and barred it. It was a heavy wooden door. He then returned to the cell passage.

"I know nothin' about yuh," he said to the prisoner. "I didn't even know yuh was here. I on'y arrived in town about sundown and ran across a hombre named Jordan. I didn't like his face, so I hit it. Later I had to shoot one of his men. Then I got myself elected mayor and put out the sheriff as one o' my first duties. I know nothin' about the town, except thet it seems to need—er—cleanin' up. I'm gonna do it."

The young man's eyes gleamed hopefully. "Is thet square?"

"Shore as yo're born!"

"Then yuh can get me outta here."

"Why should I? What yuh done to git in here?"

"I ain't done a thing. I don't even know what I'm in for. This afternoon the sheriff—Ferguson—shoved a gun in my back, brought me along here and locked me up. He said he could charge me later."

"Why should he do that?"

"Because—wal—it's like this. I'm Kurt Rogers and I work in the stables of the Wells Fargo depot. Thar's a gal in this town—name of Rose Fletcher—her mother keeps the Hotel. Wal, Jordan has taken a shine to her, and I calculate thet he looks on me as a rival and he was gonna trump somethin' up on me."

"Could be," said Ned, turning and walking back into the office. He had noticed a bunch of keys hanging on a nail in the wall and he took these down and went back to the passage.

He found the key which fitted the cell lock and opened the door.

"Come out."

The young man regarded him suspiciously. He was still not sure of Ned—still wondering if this might be some sort of a trap. He hesitated to walk out. Ned grinned. "Come on out," he said, turned and walked into the office.

The young man followed and found Ned occupying the sheriff's chair.

"Sit down," said Ned. "I got a new job for yuh. I'll need a depitty and I don't know anyone wal enough to pick one who might be loyal to me and not to Jordan. But yuh seem to be against Jordan shore enough. Can yuh use a sixgun?"

"Purty well."

"Umm! Purty well ain't well enough with these hombres. Still, I'll do most o' the shootin'. I can check up on yore story, as Rose Fletcher is a friend o' mine. Now, I'm gonna smash this gang. Want to help me?"

Rogers' jaw firmed. "Nothin' I'd like better," he said; "but can we do it?"

"We'll do it," said Ned confidently, as he rummaged through some of the drawers of the desk. "Here, put this badge on yore shirt—and this looks like your own gun, by the K.R. on the butt. Now I take it this town is run by Jordan, with the assistance of his gunmen, and Bill Collins and Fred Mason. What about the bank manager?"

"His name is Frank Gerrard and he's scared stiff, I think."

"And the Wells Fargo agent?"

"Pat Rosen is all right; he's scared too. But both he and Gerrard are against the gang."

"Good. Now I'm goin' for a walk around the town and I want you to look after this place while I'm gone. Keep the door locked after puttin' out that stuff of Ferguson's, and don't

open to anyone but me. I might be a long time. Is thar a back way out? Good. I'll take it. I'll bet thar's a gun trained on thet front door.

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NED CAUTIOUSLY left by the rear door of the jail and quietly crossed the back lots without any trouble. He had noticed a stable behind the jail, and he decided to move his horse to it, as it would be better protected there and in a good position for his final getaway. He told himself that if he cleaned up this gang the grateful citizens would almost give him the town. Whether they did or not, he was going to take it; and the mere fact of him cleaning up a dangerous gang ought to give him a clear passage.

He must look over the bank as soon as possible.

He came to the back of the livery stable and stepped quietly in the door. Bill Collins was leaning against the far door, looking out into the main street. Ned was halfway along the stable, not walking so quietly now, when Collins turned. His eyes widened, then narrowed. He almost fell in a crouch, but seeing that Ned had no gun in his hand and seemed in good humor, he just stood still.

"What do yuh want?"

"Jest come to settle my score and take my hoss along to the stables. I got me a job."

"So I heared, but it cuts no ice with me; I ain't recognisin' yore authority."

"Shorely yuh can recognise a six-gun when yuh see it?" said Ned casually. "Thet's my authority—and if yuh want to argue with it at any time, Collins, yo're at liberty to try. Thar's room on Boothill for yuh. What's my score?"

"Fergit it."

"I pay my debts—of all kinds. Thar's two dollars."

He placed two dollars on the anvil, collected his horse and saddle and passed out the back of the stable, Collins' brooding eyes on him all the time.

He took the horse to the jail stable and bedded it down. So far no one had thrown a shot at him from the darkness; he decided that Jordan must be still thinking things over. There would be plenty of flying slugs—and perhaps blades—later.

He put out the lamp in the stable and cut back across the lots until he came to an alleyway between buildings which suited his purpose. He went swiftly along this and as quickly across the road, up the porch steps, over the porch and through the open door of Mason's General Store.

The fat man was behind the long counter. When he saw Ned enter, his right hand dropped out of sight. "Leave that gun under the counter, Mason," said Ned.

"You get out o' my store!" snapped Mason; "I'll sell you nothin' and you'll get it nowhere else."

"I wasn't intendin' to buy anythin'." said Ned with a grin. "If I want anythin' from yore store I'll git someone else to git it for me. Yuh jest can't refuse to trade with everyone in town. No, I jest dropped in to have a talk to yuh."

"I got nothin' to say to a gunhawk like you."

"But I got somethin' to say to yuh. And I wanted to see yore store. Quite a good outfit yuh got—two-storied buildin' and two-storied prices. Them prices has gotta come down to reasonable ones, Mason, or I'll run yuh outta town—or shoot you outta existence. In fact, if I was yuh I'd sell out plumb slick and hightail while I was still alive."

"You can't scare me," said Mason, although he certainly looked scared.

"We'll be plantin' you in Boothill in short order."

"Mebbe—and mebbe not. Mind out it ain't yuh. I'll drop in tomorrow—make shore them prices has dropped afore I do."

He had merely stepped inside the store and now he stepped out again, without turning his back on Mason.

A few buildings further along on the other side of the road was the bank and Ned turned in that direction. The bank was an adobe building of two stories, the top floor evidently being used as a residence. Ned did not like this idea, as it might prove awkward. He wondered if Gerrard was married, and how many were in his family.

He wandered past the bank. At one side was a staircase leading to the upper portion. There were lights up there, but none in the bottom section, which was closed with a stout door, while there were bars on the windows.

Ned went down the sideway, up the stairs and knocked on the door. When the door opened he was surprised. A girl stood there—a brunette with large, liquid brown eyes. She was so lovely she almost upset him, and it was a difficult thing to upset Ned Griff. She would be about twenty-three.

"Mrs. Gerrard?" he asked.

She smiled and a dimple flashed in her cheek. "*Miss* Betty Gerrard," she corrected.

"I'm the new sheriff," said Ned. "I'd like to see yore father."

"Come in," said Betty, and stood aside.

He stepped inside, pulling off his hat. He was in a small parlor. In the centre was a table covered with a red cloth, on which stood a lamp. A middle-aged man and woman were seated there, the man reading, the woman sewing. It was a nice domestic scene.

"This is my mother and father," said Betty. "This is the new sheriff."

The man stood up suddenly and took off his glasses, peering at the newcomer. He pushed out his hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said. "Take a seat. We were just talking about you. One of the neighbors who was in the saloon came in and told us all about it. You have given us all hope."

Ned balanced himself on the edge of a chair. "I—I was just payin' some calls—seein' who I could rely on in case I needed a bit o' help," he said, rather haltingly for him.

"I'm afraid we can't give you any help," said Gerrard. "I'm not a fighting man. But if there is anything I can do otherwise—"

"I wasn't thinkin' o' thet kind o' help. So long as yuh back my moves in a sorta legal sense, I can do all the fightin' thet's needed. I take it things have been mighty tough in this town."

"We are living under a threat of death all the time—a reign of fear. And I have the responsibility of the money placed in my care."

"Yep, I thought o' thet; yuh got much of it?"

"Many thousand dollars. I wouldn't like it to fall into the hands of that gang, and every day I have been expecting them to take it—over my dead body."

"Frank!" said Mrs. Gerrard, with a shudder.

"Thet's what they'd do, ma'am," said Ned. "Dead men tell no tales. Is it well cached?"

"We have a large safe, but naturally I have the keys. You can imagine my fears—not for myself, but for my wife and daughter and the money if anything happened to me."

"It musta bin mighty tough. Well, thet's over now. I reckon I'll clean this gang out in short order. They ain't so many and I'm used to it. Thanks for the offer of help; I'll be gettin' along now."

He stood up and Gerrard remembered his duties as host.

"You'll have a drink before you go?"

Ned shook his head. "I don't drink

strong likker. I found out long ago thet it interferes with my speed. Thanks all the same. I'll see yuh agin."

Amid a chorus of farewells Betty opened the door for him and he passed out. She stepped on to the landing with him. "Thank you," she said softly. "You have taken years off father's age. You can't realize how worried he has been."

Ned glanced across at the rising moon. "And if yuh don't want to give him some more worry yuh better step inside. Some hombre's likely to throw a slug at me at any time and I'd hate yuh to git it. Goodnight."

He went swiftly down the steps, up the sideway and crossed the road, diving into an alley. The bank would be an easy job; Gerrard would hardly put up a decent fight, in spite of his words. And yet—there was a tiny disturbance in Ned's mind. It would be a danged shame to betray such nice people! But he had himself to think of first and he could not start getting sentimental.

He went along the lots until he came to the rear of the hotel. The back door was open and there was a light in the kitchen beyond. Ned approached quietly and looked through the window. There were three people in the room—a middle-aged woman, Rose and Ralph.

Ned stepped in the door. They looked up sharply. Rose smiled, but Ralph looked away sulkily.

"Come in," said Rose. "Ma, this is Mr. Griff."

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Griff," said the woman. "Thank you for sending my son home. I don't know what to do with him. He worries the life out of me."

"He'll be all right when I get rid of these hombres," said Ned. "It's jest his age. Don't yuh worry a bit."

"But how can you get rid of them?" asked Mrs. Fletcher.

"Throw 'em out or shoot 'em out. By the way, Miss Rose, I found a prisoner in the calaboose—guy name o' Kurt Rogers."

"Kurt Rogers!" said Rose, with a quick intake of breath and a look in her eyes which gave Ned a jealous twinge. "What was he doing in there?"

"The sheriff put him in under Jordan's orders. I let him out and appointed him my depitty."

"Oh, thank you!" said the girl fervently, and again Ned had that twinge. He told himself his game was not love but plunder.

Suddenly Ned made a quick move. His alert ears had caught the sounds of footsteps in the yard. He stepped back until he was flat against the wall near the door and his hand streaked for his gun.

A moment later Harry Jordan entered the kitchen, followed by his gunmen, Pete Thor and Red Maley.

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THE MEN were fully inside before they saw Ned, then they stood rock still. His gun was still in its holster, but the butt was in the palm of his hand and his finger was on the trigger. Not one of the three cared to make a move for his own gun. For a dead moment there was silence. Then Ned repeated Jordan's earlier words. "Yuh wantin' somethin'?"

"What yuh doin' here?" Jordan grated.

"I live here," said Ned. "What are *yuh* doin' here?... Yuh ain't sayin', eh? Then I'll tell yuh. Yuh come in here to scare hell outta these women and Ralph—because yuh wanta make a play f'r Miss Rose. But yore days o' scarin' folks is done, Jordan."

"I wouldn't talk so big, Stranger; we're three to one."

"And I could kill the three o' yuh afore yuh could git a gun out," said

Ned, with a dry chuckle. "And thar's nothin' I'd like better—yuh first. Try it and see."

Jordan made no verbal reply, but his eyes spoke volumes of hate.

"Lissen, Jordan," said Ned. "I've warned Ralph not to enter yore saloon. Now I'm warnin' yuh and all yore men to keep outta this place; and the penalty for infringement o' that order is—death!"

Jordan turned suddenly and walked out the door, followed by his two men. Rose and Mrs. Fletcher let out their breaths. Ned held up his left hand for silence while he listened to the fading footsteps, making sure the whole of the three men were going out of the yard.

"I'll see yuh later," he said, and crossed the room. At the far door he paused. "Oh, what number is my room?"

"Nine," said Rose. "Where are you going now?"

"I'll tell yuh when I been thar," said Ned, and went through to the front of the building.

He stood in the shadow of the passage and took a long look out into the street before he stepped through the door. He wondered if Jordan would be cunning enough to suspect that he would leave the building by the front or whether he would just post his men to watch the back. He knew that the bullets would be flying now, for Jordan was in a killing mood, if that expression in his eyes was any guide.

He stepped along the boardwalk a few paces. He thought his action in leaving had been so sudden that none of Jordan's men would have seen him yet. He found a spot between two windows where it was very dark, and there stood against the wall, his eyes roving over the street.

Lights shone from doorways and windows and threw golden carpets of illumination for a short distance, but all else was darkness. The rising moon was shedding a feeble glow, as it was only a quarter moon, and it seemed to rather increase the darkness of the shadows rather than lessen it.

Ned stiffened a little. His alert roving eyes had seen two men show for an instant in a patch of light. They looked like Red Maley and Pete Thor. They had crossed the road and dived into an alleyway further down on the other side.

Ned grinned. He could see their objective. They would walk along the back lots opposite until they came to an alleyway which would command a view of the front of the hotel. Ned left his shelter and ran across the road to a building beside the saloon. The building was small—a mining assayer's office—and it was dark and quiet. He flattened himself in the doorway and waited.

In less than a minute he heard a tin can rattle in the alleyway between the saloon and the assayer's office, followed by a smothered curse. Ned grinned. In a moment more he could hear the movements of two men close to him and he could see them plainly in the semi-darkness. They crouched in the opening of the alley, watching the hotel.

"I think Jordan was wrong," whispered one; "he'd go out the back way."

"*If* he went out," whispered the other. "Still, we gotta do what we're told."

Ned was no more than four feet from them. Although he could not make out details he could see their outlines clearly enough—and he could see the guns in their hands. There was no doubt they were Maley and Thor and that they were there to drygulch him.

Suddenly he stepped out, right before them, drawing both guns as he moved. "Lookin' for me?"

With gasps of surprise they brought up their guns, but they didn't have a chance. His two guns blazed.

Almost before the bodies had hit the ground he was on the move again. He leapt over them and ran down the alley up which they had come, holstering his

smoking guns. There were people in the street and they would come running at the shots—and he had no time to waste in answering questions.

He ran out of the back end of the alley and across the yard to a barn behind the saloon. He stepped inside the open door and stood in the darkness, watching. He saw men run from the back door of the saloon and up the alley.

There was hubbub and noise at the front end of the alley. The bodies had been found and perhaps Jordan and his gang were searching for Ned. No one had come from the saloon's back door for almost a minute. The saloon should be practically empty. Ned stepped swiftly across the yard and went through the back door.

As he walked up the passage he was making a calculation. Jordan had had seven gunslicks or supporters. Add those to Jordan, Mason and Collins—that made ten. Three of those were dead. That left seven. "First there were ten...and then there were seven." He smiled as he thought of the "Ten Little Indians."

HE FOUND the foot of the stairs and climbed swiftly. His idea in entering the saloon was to baffle his enemies. That was one place they would not think to look and, if he was hidden upstairs, he could either come down or catch them when they came up, and wipe them out at his leisure. For that was his intention.

He had no compunction regarding these gunslicks; he had only contempt for them. They were outlaws like himself, in a way, but they were a different type—a type without initiative and often without courage, who always had to have a boss and plenty of supporters. They were bad men the easy way and the cowardly way. Ned knew that while one of them remained alive he was in danger of his own life, and he could not go forward with his own scheme. When Jordan and his men were dead, the saloon, safe and all, would be wide open; when Mason was dead the coffers and goods of his store would also be wide open. The bank and the Wells Fargo office would be trickier, but he had half-formed plans for those. He must first remove the other obstacles—and do it according to his own code.

He knew that he was likely to make a slight mistake and be killed, but that was part of the game. It suddenly struck him that no one had offered to pay his wages as sheriff. Well, he would have his pay later.

He reached the upper landing. There was no one in the passage which ran straight ahead to the back of the building. There were doors each side. A lamp swung from a hook just above the top of the stairs and this gave him plenty of light. He looked around for a good hiding place.

The passage was entirely bare. There remained the rooms, the doors of which were closed. But which room? Some might be occupied and someone might come walking out at any moment, although he fancied that everyone would be downstairs inspecting the bodies of Maley and Thor. But any room should do. Most rooms of that period had a simple wardrobe made by hanging a curtain across a corner, to keep the dust off clothes hung on pegs behind. One of these curtains should suit Ned's purpose as a hiding place.

He was standing in the centre of the passage, looking at the closed doors and wondering which room would best suit his purpose when he lifted his head sharply. The faint sound of many voices came to him, rapidly growing nearer. The door into the bar opened below and the voices came up in a flood. Ned immediately realized by the jumble of words what was happening.

The bodies of Maley and Thor were being carried in—and they intended to bring them upstairs and place the dead men in their own rooms! If only Ned knew which rooms those were! He realized that the corpse of Slim must be

up here somewhere and that would be a good room to hide in, but he had no time to find it now. The crowd was already on the stairs and unless he moved at once he would be seen.

He must make a shot in the dark. He stepped to the door nearest to him, tried the handle, found it unlocked, as he had expected, pushed it wide enough for him to enter, slipped inside, and gently closed the door again, standing against it and listening.

"Who's that?" asked a voice behind him!

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LIKE A flash Ned's gun was out. On soft feet he stepped across the dark room towards the voice, hoping he would bump nothing on the way.

His outstretched left hand touched a bed.

"Who's that?" the voice asked again, louder and close to him.

There was someone lying on the bed and he recognized the voice. It was Roley Ferguson, the erstwhile sheriff. Ned felt along swiftly, jerked the man's gun from its holster and jammed his own gun into Ferguson's ribs. "Quiet!" he hissed. "Or I'll blow yuh to hell."

The men carrying the bodies were making so much noise in the passage that he knew they would not have heard Ferguson's voice. He placed his mouth close to the man's ear. "Lissen," he said. "This is Ned Griff here—the new sheriff. What are yuh doin' here? Whisper soft when yuh answer."

"I gotta go somewhar," whispered Ferguson, who was now not quite so drunk. "Jordan put me up. He told me I'd git my job back as soon as he's burnt the jail and run yuh outta town on a rail, or carried yuh up to Boothill."

"He's gotta do thet yet. Lissen, Ferguson, I got nothin' aginst yuh; I don't think yo're an active member o' this gang. Yo're on'y boss is likker and yo're a real slave to thet. But I'm warnin' yuh—if yuh take active sides with them yuh'll go to Boothill with 'em, and don't ferget it. Sssh!"

He had heard footsteps outside. The handle turned. Griff leapt away from the bed and through the darkness, reaching the rear side of the door as it opened, shielding him from the light of the passage.

A match was struck and some men entered. Ned silently drew his second gun. There was likely to be discovery at any moment now. He might have a hard job fighting his way out. He wished he had replaced those four spent cartridges.

The man carrying the match came within his view. It was Jordan. He set the match to a lamp on a bracket and the light flared up. Another man came into view, Pat Flanigan. The two men stood by Ferguson's bed, looking down at him.

Another man entered the room and closed the door behind him, leaving Ned in full view and feeling rather naked. Yet none of the men had seen him yet. Their eyes were all on Ferguson.

"Thet coyote has killed Red and Pete," said Jordan. "He—say, what yuh lookin' so scared about?"

"Reach for yore guns, gents!" said Ned.

The three men swung together. They knew that voice now, and it must have sounded like the voice of Fate to Jordan, for Ned seemed to be everywhere.

As the men turned, they clawed at their guns, and Ned started firing. His first shot took Jordan square in the centre of the forehead and the man went down with a crash; Ned's second shot hit Flanigan in the chest and sent him back across the bed; and Ned's third shot—a split-second before the

third man's—Trigger Jackson—tore a great hole in the gunman's stomach and bent him over double, clawing at the wound. Jackson's own shot hit the door.

The ex-sheriff lay still, his eyes tight closed, expecting death every moment, a heavy body across his middle. Ned decided that Ferguson was harmless, so he turned towards the door.

Feet were running along the passage. A man shouted through the door. "What's all the shootin'?"

"We got Griff!" said Ned, muffling his voice with the back of his right hand.

"Good!" yelled the voice, and the door opened as Ned stepped back, his guns levelled.

The room was thick with eddying smoke, and Ned looked like some demon out of hell in the midst of it. Ferguson was coughing; a body lay across him, and two more lay on the floor. Somewhere in the back of the fog burned a lamp.

A big man stood in the doorway. "Too much smoke!" he said, trying to see.

"Draw, Fallon!" barked Ned.

Ned twisted and his gun blazed. The roar filled the passage—and Fallon passed on. At the moment he fired Ned leapt sideways—and the bullet that screamed from a doorway at him merely ripped his shirt. He saw the cloud of smoke in the doorway and ran forward, throwing a shot as he went, only for the purpose of keeping the gunman inside. He then holstered his righthand gun as he knew it was empty, and changed his lefthand gun over to his right hand.

He swung round the corner of the room door and through the smoke, moving swiftly and firing again, wildly. A bullet warmed his neck and then he saw his man, like a wraith amid his own smoke—and Ned fired once more.

He swung round swiftly. There was no one else in the room—except the corpse of Red Maley.

NED STOOD poised on the balls of his feet, his eyes glancing over the room and through the door. He holstered his gun and jerked out the empty one. Swiftly, without relaxing a second, he emptied and reloaded. That had been a fast couple of minutes and his gunbarrel was still hot!

Someone was shouting from below. As Ned thumbed home the cartridges he looked down at the body on the floor. It was Jim Tate. He made another rapid calculation. He should have little oppositon now, for he had killed every one of Jordan's seven gunslicks—and Jordan himself. In the last couple of minutes he had killed five men!

There was still the bartender—also Fred Mason and Bill Collins. He was not sure the bartender was one of the gang, but there were still at least two little "Indians."

He emptied the four dead cartridges from his second gun and replaced them with live ones. With his guns in his holsters he stepped out of the room into the passage.

Fallon lay in a heap at one end of it, twitching. There was acrid smoke still drifting. Several heads were in view on the stairs in line with the floor. The owners were playing safe.

"Is that yuh, Griff?" asked a voice.

Ned recognized the man as a miner and one of those who had helped him earlier. He walked towards the stairs. "Thet's me," he said. "I jest had a slight gun argument with Jordan and his gang. They lost."

The man started. "Yuh mean—they's all dead?"

"Thet close to it, it don't matter," said Ned. "They deserved it. Beats me they lived so long—they was slow thinkers."

He walked down the stairs and the crowd made way for him. He was still on the alert and keyed for the slightest sign of trouble. All his enemies had not been rendered harmless and there might be some he did not know about.

He walked through the rear door of the bar. "Git the bartender to give yuh all a drink on the house, boys," said Ned. "Then I'll close the saloon."

For Ned had no intention of letting anyone else loot the place before he had a chance to do it.

"What bartender?" asked a miner.

"He was thar a moment ago," said another man; "right behind us."

"When he heard what happened to his boss he must have hitched out," said Ned. "Gone to his other bosses, I expect. Wal, perhaps I'll meet him thar. Someone act as barkeep and make it fast—I got business to finish."

Two men jumped the counter and started to serve drinks quickly. For some reason or other a free drink always tastes better than a bought one. Ned thought they were entitled to a few free drinks, seeing all the money of which Jordan must have robbed them in the past. And, as he did not drink himself, he did not care what they did with the stock. He could not take it with him or sell it. Jordan may have heirs somewhere to whom it belonged, but that was their bad luck.

While he was waiting—impatiently, because he did not want to give Collins and Mason breathing space and time to plan—he glanced at the clock over the bar. It stood at seven minutes past eleven—and he was surprised it was not much later. It had been a busy night and he had worked fast. For a moment he considered looting the town before dawn, but that would be impossible. The bank must be carefully planned. But he would empty a few safes before dawn and cache the money in a safe place.

He had a sudden idea. The jail would be a good cache, but he must get young Rogers out of it first.

"Hurry it up, boys!" he yelled. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He stepped out through the swinging doors, diving immediately into the shadows and keeping a wary eye around him. There was a light burning on the upper story of the store. The livery stable was in darkness. Well, it was nice to know where he would find his men.

He reached the jail, where a light still burned, and knocked on the door.

"Who's thar?" asked Rogers.

"It's me—the sheriff—Ned Griff. Open up."

Kurt Rogers opened the door cautiously, a gun in his hand. He breathed a sigh of relief when Ned stepped into the office. "I heard a lot o' shootin' up town," he said. "I thought they got yuh shore."

"Not yet," said Ned dryly. "Yuh can close up the jail and go home. I'll take the key. It's almost all over. I got a bit o' business to finish, but thet won't take me long and thar ain't no more danger here. Jest close the door. On yore way home yuh better drop in and see Rose—she'll be glad to see yuh and I'll bet she's still up. In fact, I'd be plumb surprised if thar's anyone in bed in this town tonight. Tell Rose she has no more to fear from Jordan; he and his gunmen are dead."

They were walking up the street now. Kurt Rogers stopped. He would have asked for particulars, but Ned waved him on. "I'll see yuh later," he said, "if yo're still at the Fletcher's when I git home."

Ned was turning into the saloon again when he glanced at the windows above the store. There was no light there now. He stood for a moment in thought. Collins and Mason would hardly have gone to bed. They may be out looking for him. That was unlikely. Maybe they were hiding somewhere.

The most likely thing was that they had fled—and if they had fled they would have taken their money. That must be prevented at all costs.

Ned hurried into the saloon and shooed out the free customers. He then locked the front doors from the inside, put out the lights, went through to the back, locking the rear door of the bar behind him. Upstairs there was silence

—the silence of death. The ex-sheriff was there, perhaps still coughing feebly, if he hadn't succumbed to the sulphur fumes.

Ned took a last look at his guns to make sure the work they had had would not cause them to clog at a critical moment. He had no time to clean them. They seemed to be working well. He put them back in his holsters, put out the lamp in the passage, and went out the rear door.

He moved swiftly across the lots to the rear of the livery. Quietly he stepped in the back door. All was dark and silent. After a moment he struck a match. What he saw made him light a candle and take a better look.

Tied near the door were two saddled horses, with thick packs behind the saddles. Over both of them were thrown saddlebags and Ned felt the bags. There was money inside!

So Collins and Mason preferred flight to death! Which was sensible. They knew Griff would kill them, so they had cleaned out their safes and were hightailing for pastures new. But where were they now?

As a precaution that the men would not evade him and ride off with "his" money, Ned led the horses out the back of the stables and across to some trees which fringed the back lots. There he hitched them, to await his coming later. Very thoughtful of Collins and Mason to empty their safes and load the money all ready for him to take!

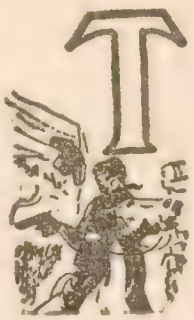
But he must find them. The most likely place they would be would be the store.

He walked through the livery, blowing out the candle, and crossed the road towards the store. The town was quietening down now, although most buildings had lights. There were no lights in the store, on either floor.

Ned stood for a moment thinking. Was this a trap? Were the two men and perhaps the bartender waiting for him to enter? Or were they somewhere else? Where else could they be? For what would they delay their flight? There was only one thing which had actuated all their lives—the acquisition of money.

Suddenly Ned started to run across the road—full speed for the bank!

- 7 -



THERE WAS a light on the top floor of the bank building. Ned kept on running. He raced down the side of the place and up the stairs. The door at the top was open. With his usual caution he paused.

He peeped round the corner of the door into the parlor.

There were his men—and there also were the three Gerrards—and a ticklish situation! On one side of the room stood Gerrard and his wife, their faces white. On the other side stood two masked men, but the masks were useless and their figures showed them to be Collins and Mason. Mason had a gun pointing at the two Gerrards; Collins had an arm wrapped round the body of Betty Gerrard, so that he was holding her before him as a shield, while in his right hand was a sixgun—and Ned's heart missed a beat when he saw that Collins' thumb was holding back the hammer, while the muzzle was pressed into the girl's side. If Collins' thumb slipped the girl would die!

That was Collins' idea, as his words showed.

"We want the money in the bank safe," he growled. "If we don't get the keys quickly I'll lift my thumb and yore daughter will die. No doubt about it, Gerrard. I'll give yuh ten seconds to deliver them keys."

"But how can I be sure you won't still kill my daughter and us?" Gerrard answered.

"Yuh have my word—both ways.

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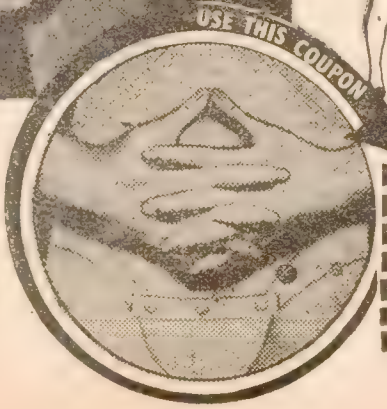

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Yuh got to act quick."

"*I'll* do the acting, Collins," said a voice from the doorway.

Ned had been careful to make his voice soft, to lessen the shock in case Collins should release that hammer. He did not show himself in the doorway, however, as he did not wish shooting to take place. He knew his own accuracy, but he did not know the accuracy of either Collins or Mason, and there were women in that room.

"Who said thet?" breathed Mason.

"I said it," said Ned, still out of sight. "I'm outside, round the corner of the door—Ned Griff, the new mayor. Thet gun of yores works both ways, Collins. If it goes off and harms Miss Gerrard yuh die on thet instant—and Mason with yuh."

Peeping through the crack where the door-jamb badly joined the wall he saw Mason cast a glance at the door and retreat hurriedly behind Collins and the girl. Collins backed swiftly and he and Mason vanished through a far door. Now they were under cover, too, and they had dragged the girl with them.

"Stop!" yelled Gerrard.

"Leave this to me, Mr. Gerrard," said Ned. "Come out of thar, yuh coyotes, with yore hands up, or I'll come in and git yuh."

"Yuh come and git us—and the gal's dead body," yelled Collins.

For several moments there was silence. They had Ned tricked and they knew it; he knew it, too. If the girl had not been in their hands he would have taken his chances and dashed across the room behind a hail of lead. But the men were desperate; they would carry out their threat. How to dislodge them without hurting the girl was the problem—and it was not an easy one. He had had his chance—he should have tried to shoot that gun out of Collins' hand. But the angle was wrong and the risk to the girl too great.

Over a minute passed and then Gerrard could stand the strain no longer.

[*Turn To Page* 841

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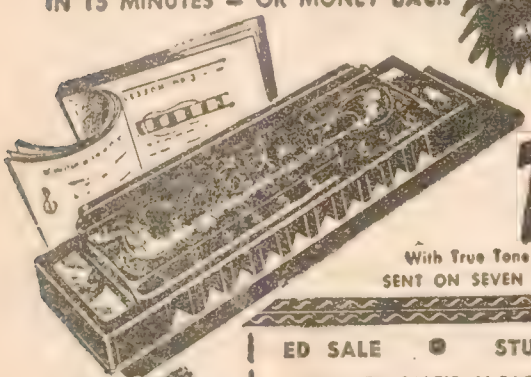

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"Release my daughter!" he cried. "I will give you the keys."

There was no answer. After a few more moments Ned stepped in the door, his guns ready but silent. He waved a hand to Gerrard and his wife to keep back, stepped quietly across the parlor and peeped round the corner of the far door, gun in hand. There was no lamp in the other room, but there was a lamp in a far one and it faintly illuminated this one, which was empty. Ned turned back to Gerrard.

"They are not in this room," he said softly. "Is there another way out?"

"No. They must be in the next—no, they could have gone through the front window and on to the porch roof and reached the street that way. But they could hardly do that with Betty."

"They could hand her to each other and keep a gun on her. I wish they had never got hold of yore daughter. It ties my hands and makes things difficult. Wal, we gotta try and git her, or they might kill her in any case."

He walked quietly through the far room and into the front bedroom, in which burned a lamp. The curtains were blowing from an open window, but there was no one in the room. He stood to one side of the window and looked out. The porch roof was only a few feet below. The faint moonlight showed three people crossing the road. At that moment they vanished into the shadows of Mason's store.

Ned turned and walked back to the parlor. "They went out the front," he said to the worried banker. "They took her over to the store. I gotta git her. Now I can't do it by open attack because of her, so I'll have to find a way in quiet-like and surprise 'em. The sooner I git them the sooner we'll git

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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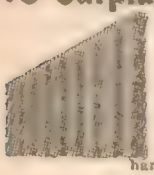

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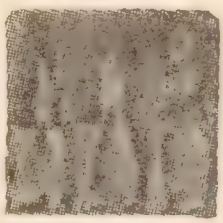

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her. Yuh leave it to me. I won't be long."

HE HOLSTERED his guns and went down the steps. He had a formidable task ahead of him, and he knew it. The two men would be on the alert and he would have to enter a place which would be locked like a fortress, without them knowing he was doing so.

The back was covered with a small porch. Above the porch was a window on the upper floor, which was partly open. Ned moved like a shadow across the yard, grasped the roof of the porch, tested its strength, then drew himself up with a straight arm lift. He dragged himself silently on to the porch roof and stood up. The window was quite close to him. He listened. There was a murmur of voices inside. The men were together in that lighted room. But the door might be locked or bolted as an extra precaution. He knew that both these men had a deadly fear of him.

The window was open at the top and he looked higher. Yes, if he climbed on the window he could grasp the gently-sloping roof, which was low here as it was lower at the back than the front. Gently he climbed higher and in a moment found himself crouched on a shingled roof.

He smiled grimly and crawled up the roof until he was near the front, on the higher portion. With his strong fingers he gripped a shingle and eased it up, hoping the nails would not squeak. The nails were fairly new and came out quietly. He eased off another shingle and continued to take off shingles until there was a large enough hole to admit his body.

He wondered what was below. In most places of this kind, where the roof was fairly high, an attic or storeroom was usually built in the higher portion. He was working on that assumption. He decided to risk a light.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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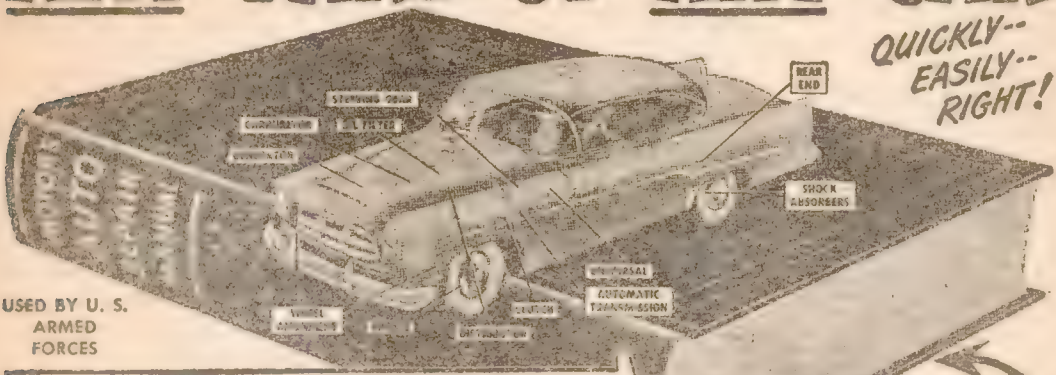

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He struck a match, pushed it through the hole and took a quick glance round. He had been right. Below was a floored space full of old boxes and other junk. He blew out the match and lowered himself through. Before his arms were fully stretched, his feet touched the floor. He was glad of that. He reached out of the hole and roughly replaced the shingles.

He struck another match and inspected his work. Yes, to a superficial glance there did not appear to be anything different about those shingles. The attic spread a fair distance, the roof getting lower and lower. He tried to estimate where that room would be in which he had seen the lamp burning, blew out his match and moved across the floor on hands and knees, so that he would make no sound which might be heard by the men beneath.

After several trials, with his ear to the floor, he at last found a spot which must be right over the men. They were not talking softly and he could hear them plainly.

"It ain't no use high-tailin' till we got rid o' Griff," said Mason. "He would come right after us and git us. We got the whip-hand at the moment; we got the gal. We gotta use her, not only to git Griff but the bank money. On'y for Griff we'd have it now."

"Yuh gotta plan?" asked Collins.

"Yep. This is it. Griff is gonna come nosin' about this place when he finds we've gone, which shouldn't be for awhiles yet. I votes we ties up the gal and then goes outside—"

"But he might git in and find her."

"We'll hide her whar he won't find her. He'll be slow—goin' careful. Now we waits outside. He's shore to come nosin' about and we can bush him. I'll take the back and you take the front. He'll expect us to be inside with the gal, see. But we gotta hurry. Here, help me hogtie the gal."

[*Turn To Page 90*]

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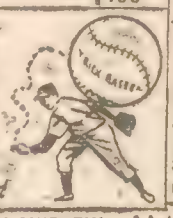

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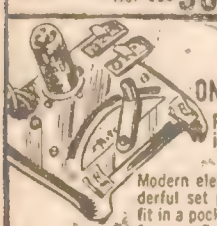

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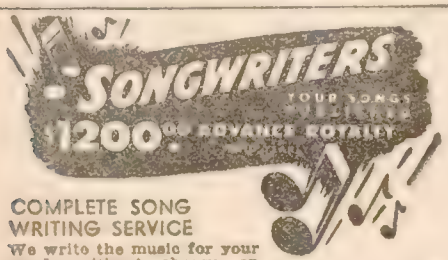

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For some moments there was silence. Then the girl spoke.

"I don't care what you do to me—kill me if you like—but leave Ned Griff alone."

"Oho!" said Collins. "So yuh took a shine to thet critter, have yuh? Yo're wastin' yore time on a dead man, gal. Better shove a gag in her mouth, Fred. Thet's right. Now whar yuh gonna hide her? Yuh know yore own place better'n me."

"We'll put her in the attic!" said Mason.

- 8 -

AT THE WORDS Ned's heart leapt with exultation. Then he realized that it would be too risky to open fire on the men if they walked right in on him; they would have the girl. He was beginning to think a great deal of that girl and he did not want her hit by a ricocheting slug. He could hear the men moving out of the room, carrying the girl. No, it would be better for him to wait until he could get the men right away from the girl, and that should not be long now.

He had noticed the trapdoor which led up to the place. It was a long way from his present position and he swiftly shifted a few cases to give him cover, then crouched down behind them.

He heard the trapdoor open and a light grew in the place. Through the cracks of his concealment he saw Collins climb into view carrying a candle. Ned could have shot him easily. He put the candle down on a case and leaned over the trap.

"Pass her up," he said.

The grunting Mason passed up the girl, who was bound wrist and ankle,

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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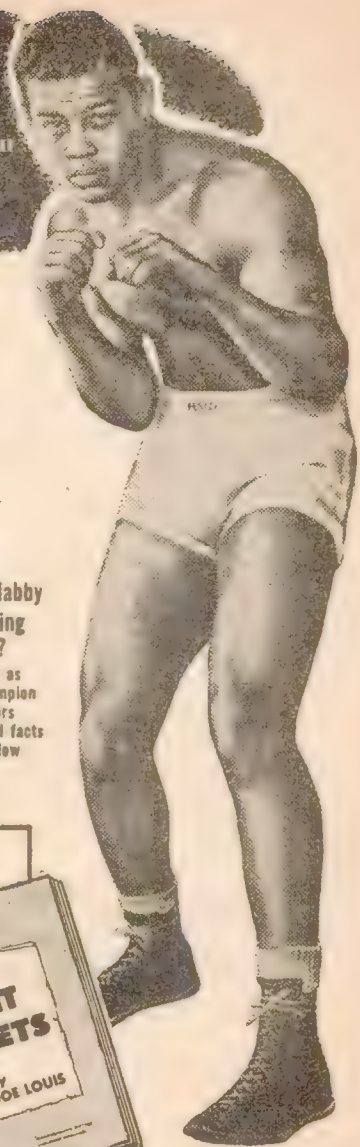

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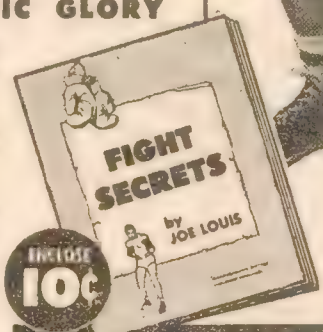

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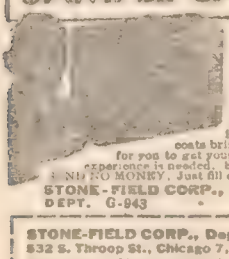

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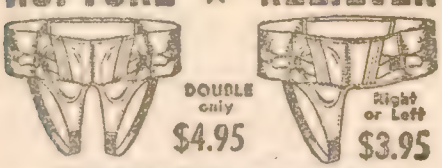

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and gagged. Collins placed her on the dusty floor.

"We'll be back f'r yuh later, sweetheart," he said, picked up the candle and went down the steps.

The trapdoor closed. Ned kept quite still until he was sure the men were on the lower floor at least, if not out of the building.

"Miss Betty," he whispered, "don't be scairt—it's me—Ned Griff."

He felt his way across the floor in the darkness until he touched her soft body. At once he began to untie her wrists. "I'm mighty glad them hombres didn't hurt yuh much," he whispered. "If they had, I guess I'd o' tried out some Injun tortures on 'em."

He released the gag. She was almost sobbing with relief. "Oh, I thought they had gone to kill you!" she said, and he found her arms around him.

He said nothing, just held her close in the darkness. He did not even think, but somehow his lips found her mouth. After a moment the kiss ended and she snuggled close.

"Ned," she said shyly, "I hope you won't think me forward, but that first time I saw you something went inside of me. No other man has ever affected me like that. You are not married, are you—oh, but I'm being forward again!"

"I guess yo're jest bein' natural," said Ned. "No, I ain't ever been married. I ain't the kind to work well in a team. Yuh see, I never met a gal like yuh afore, either, and I wanta settle down, but—well, I jest can't, thet's all."

"Why?" She was stroking his hair as he untied her ankles.

"I'm a wanted man, thet's why!" he told the darkness, and for the first time in his life he was not proud of the fact.

"But whatever you have done would make no difference to me—and what you have done here should wipe out any debt you have to society."

"Mebbe," he said dryly. "Wal, I ain't

[*Turn To Page* 94]

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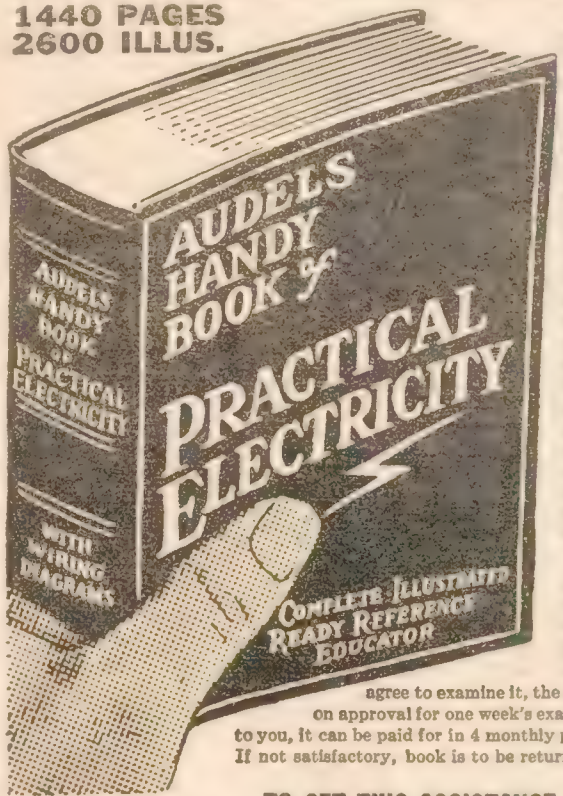

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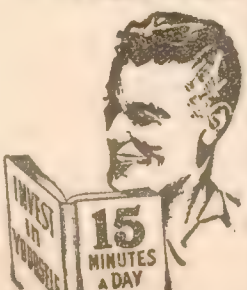

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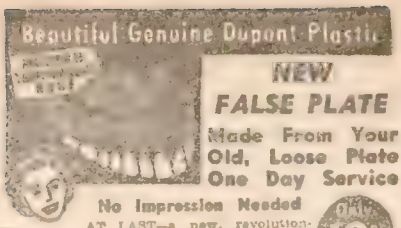

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finished here yet. I gotta go down and git Mason and Collins."

"No, no!" she said.

"Yuh ain't got no cause to worry. I'll surprise 'em and they will be easy. I overheard their plans through the ceilin'. But yuh stay here, whar yo're safe. Wait fifteen minutes. If I ain't back then yuh go home to yore Pa and Ma."

"And you'll come to me there?"

"Mebbe," he said. "Now, be quiet, if yuh value my life."

He felt his way to the trapdoor, lifted it, slipped through, closed it behind him and descended the ladder to the passage. There was a light shining through the open doorway of a room—Mason must have left it burning as a decoy. It gave Ned a dim light to see his way to the stairs.

He descended quickly and silently and found himself in another passage. He felt along it towards the front, found a door and opened it cautiously. He was now in the store proper, and the dim moonlight shining through the large windows gave him some light by which to see. He walked round the counter and across to the glass-fronted door, which was not locked. He stood looking out into the street for many moments, his eyes searching the shadows.

The town was quiet now, for the saloon was closed. Far away a coyote was howling mournfully. Suddenly Ned saw what he wanted—a shadow moving where a shadow should not move. He opened the door enough to slip through and closed it behind him, standing on the dark porch. In an alley opposite a shadow was moving and by its appearance was watching the bank, in the upper story of which lights still burned.

Suddenly Ned leapt into the dim light of the road, drawing as he leapt, and landing square on his feet.

The shadow cried out and swung round, but Ned's gun blazed—and the shadow bent over suddenly, held a moment, then fell to the dust. Like light-

ning, Ned leapt back on to the porch and stood in the darkness near the wall, waiting.

The shot had started echoes. Ned waited. Doors and windows were raised and people called questions, but soon that ceased.

Minutes passed. Then there was a sound in the side alley. Someone moved into line with the end of the porch, looking about. It was a fat someone.

"Bill!" called a voice. "Was that you fired? Did you get him?"

"Nope!" said Ned. "I'm right here, Mason."

The fat man gave a strangled cry and the gun in his hand went off with the shock, the slug tearing into the porch floor. Then Ned shot him—deliberately and accurately in spite of the bad light.

Mason gurgled a little, grasped at the porch rail, then fell to the ground.

Ned holstered his gun. The town was open at last—wide open.

He stood thinking. Over in the trees were two horses with a load of money, his for the taking. In the saloon was a safe of money, also his for the taking. The bank and the Wells Fargo office?

Well, they would mean more work and perhaps he would have enough to start up in a fair way in Mexico without the bank's money and the Wells Fargo money. He had only to clean out the saloon, get his horse and the loaded pack-horses, and ride. He would be well on his way before pursuit started—leaving a heap of dead bodies for the citizens to bury.

Well, he had done the town a good turn; he was entitled to his reward. They had given him nothing so far.

Nothing? Well, they had given him the love of a good and beautiful woman, and perhaps that was more precious than gold. Maybe. Gold was more constant. Or was it? It had always managed to leave him in the past.

[*Turn Page*]

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He rubbed the bristles on his chin and thought hard.

Don't be a fool, he told himself. *Take the money. It is so easy—just there for the taking—and you have risked your life for it. You were determined to loot this town and now you can. Take the loot and go—free as the wind.*

And leave the girl? That would be hard. Upstairs she would be counting the minutes, wondering what had happened to him. Could he break her heart? Of course! He had broken hearts before. But those girls weren't like this one, and he hadn't cared; this time he did care.

He took a deep breath and ground his teeth to wrestle with his problem. Of course, if he stayed in this town he could have the sheriff's job—at forty lousy dollars a month. But a man could live on that—perhaps keep a wife. He had been going to settle down in Mexico; it would be better to settle down among his own kind, doing a good job amongst a grateful people. Other bad men would come to Rich Bar. He would be needed here.

But those things did not matter very much. The real issue was between the money and her. He could not have both. And some day his past might catch up on him—though it wasn't that bad.

He swung swiftly as he heard a click behind him. The store door was opening.

"Ned, is that you?" asked a shaking voice.

Ned sighed. "Thet's me," he said.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

"And Mason and Collins?"

"Are dead."

"I waited what I judged was fifteen minutes, dear," she said, coming to him, taking his arm and placing it around her. "Why are you so quiet? What are you thinking of?"

"Nothin' now," he said, as his arm tightened round her. "Only you!"

★

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but can't get started

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ANSWERS To The "Know Yore West" Quiz

1. False. Bronc busting is the breaking and taming of a bronco.
2. True. Buckaroo is another name for a cowboy.
3. False. Bulldogging is wild steer wrestling.
4. True. Chaparral is a bushy growth found in the Southwest.
5. False. Cutting is separating a steer from the herd.
6. True. Cactus is a thorny plant of the Southwest desert.
7. False. A cinch is a girth attaching a saddle to a horse.
8. True. A chuck wagon is a kitchen on wheels that follows the roundup.
9. True. A dude is a person who comes to the West for the adventure and excitement.
10. True. A homesteader is one who settles on a government claim.
11. False. A lasso is a cowboy's rope.
12. False. A night herder is a person who has charge of the herd in certain hours of the night.
13. False. An outlaw horse is a horse that has been spoiled in breaking.
14. False. Pronto means to step lively.
15. True. A peeler is an expert who breaks a bronc.
16. False. A pinto is a horse splashed with several colors.
17. True. Rawhide is a crude leather made from cowhide.
18. False. Reateas are always made of rawhide. A lariat can either be made of rawhide or grass.
19. True. Savvy means to understand.
20. False. A road brand is all brands of cattle with one certain brand, of a given herd, on the trail.

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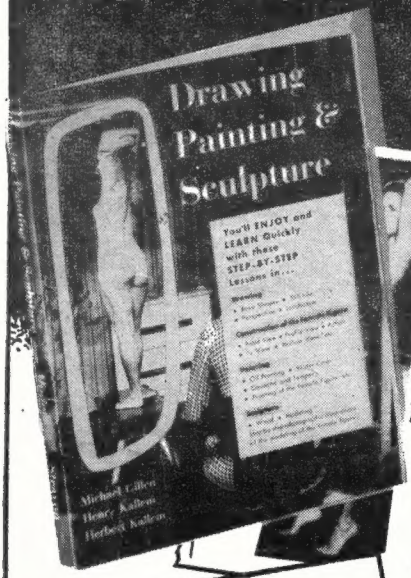
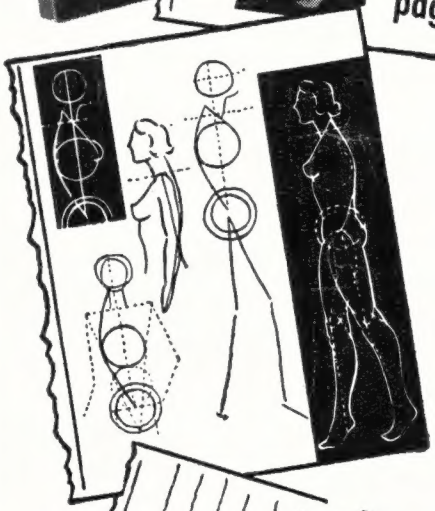


Photo of Real Artists Model Appears on this page



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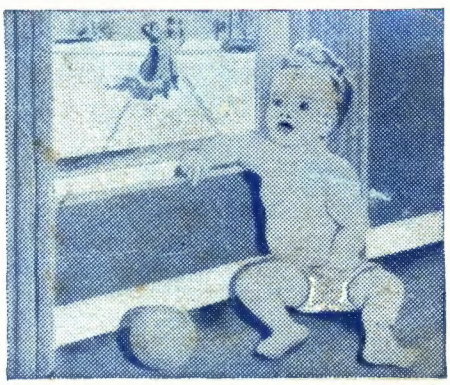

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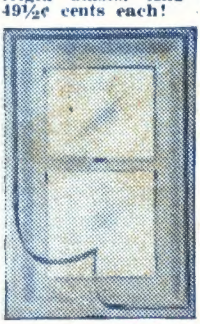

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